NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

No. 98
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THEORY
John Rackham

THE BEST POSSIBLE WORLD
Richard Wilson

THE DOORWAY
Wynne N. Whiteford

TEST CASE
Donald Malcolm

Serial
THE FATAL FIRE
Conclusion
Kenneth Bulmer

Features

14th Year
of Publication

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Richard Wilson

New York

Like many of his American contemporaries, Richard Wilson has been writing science fiction for a long time and is one of a small group of resident New Yorkers who, from amateur beginnings in the 1930's have progressed over the years into the professional field of writing or editing. Although his yearly output of fiction is not high his total of acceptances has mounted steadily and he has had scores of short stories published, many of the best being reprinted in either *New Worlds* or *Science Fantasy*. "The Best Possible World" in this issue is its first publication.

A collection of his short stories *Those Idiots From Earth* was published by Ballantine Books in 1958 who subsequently published his first book-length novel *The Girls From Planet Five*, the film of which goes into production at the end of this year (retitled "Take Me To Your Leader"). Despite the satirical new title (after all, the book was a satire) the film is to be a serious production in colour and may well influence Hollywood to break away from the "horror-cum-fantasy" rut the script writers have ploughed during recent years.

Night editor on a New York wire service, he hears most of the astronautical news almost as soon as it happens and his stories have an authentic ring of truth about them. "Super City" a long novelette which appeared in *Science Fantasy* two years ago was recently published in USA by Ace Books under the title *And Then The Town Took Off*.

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TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Life . . .

One of the problems an editor is constantly faced with is the fact that printer's type is not elastic and with only a limited number of pages at his disposal every issue it isn't always possible to get a quart into a pint pot. As with *Postmortem* in this magazine—sometimes it appears, sometimes book reviews take the spare space, sometimes neither appear. Which as far as those readers who are interested (or annoyed) enough to write in, can be very frustrating as their comments can be out of date if left unpublished too long.

I regret that this has happened many times during recent years. In fact, some fine letters are on file which will never be used because of that fact. To those readers who miss the boat with their comments, sincere apologies. The exclusion act is not deliberate but solely due to the problem of production.

This brings me to a further difficult point. Recent editorials have all been designed to stimulate discussion or argument in *Postmortem*. It would seem that I more than justified the idea and stirred up a hornet's nest into the bargain. There are so many variations of the "Plot-Not" and 'self-criticism' themes coming in that I am finding readers are even criticising the critics for criticising. Editorially, where to draw the line (if at all) assuming that there is space to publish all these different opinions? Or, how long before such objects are 'cold?' Against this has to be weighed the fact that the vast majority of readers are not wholly in favour of the letter section and would prefer book reviews or additional fiction. A further point is that new readers who miss the original controversial points when first raised have no idea what the discussions are about unless they are prepared to buy back issues on a hit or miss basis.

So, even on such a simple matter as including readers' letters there are innumerable problems to be considered and a decision to be made as to how Mr. Average Reader will react. But the biggest problem of all is what to do about the innumerable misconstructions some readers place upon either editorial items or specific portions in the letter section. More often than not I am quoted editorially for something a reader has theorised about; or if I have been writing about the American science fiction markets it has been assumed that I also meant

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. . . Line

the British market. The misconstruction in these matters is not deliberate but the *assumption* involved would create editorial replies in *Postmortem* which would eat up still more space, thereby creating argument rather than discussion. And undoubtedly annoying the larger percentage of the readership.

Discerning readers may well have noticed that I apparently do a fine job of sitting on the fence in these matters. This is deliberate. The policy is for the Editorial to mirror science fiction events *without* personal opinion whenever possible and the *Postmortem* section is for readers to discuss, argue and suggest ideas around such items—always providing they wish to. Hence my own neutrality.

So, if your letter is not published, it will be because of many reasons beyond immediate control for publication. But appreciated nevertheless.

Incidentally, the 'self-criticism' angle will probably be re-opened later on when we review the Kingsley Amis non-fiction book *New Maps Of Hell*, a dissertation on and about modern s-f, which will be coming from Victor Gollancz Ltd., in the Spring (it has already been published in North America). In this erudite and often satirical exposition Mr. Amis devotes part of a chapter to the debate and discussion that goes on amongst s-f readers (and has gone on for nearly three decades). Whatever his summation of this trait—and you will have to wait for the book to learn more—I see one all-important reason for the stimulation of discussion in the s-f magazines : by and large the readers' section has been the main breeding ground for prospective new writers. Many prominent professional writers today first discussed the aspects of s-f in the letter column of a magazine and from there went on to do something about it by writing the type of stories they were interested in and thought the genre could do with.

For the sake of posterity (our own) we need the life-line between reader and author.

John Carnell

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In practise the best possible men would be chosen for spaceflight, either interplanetary or stellar. Theoretically they might not be as suitable as graphs, charts and statistics would infer

THEORY

by JOHN RACKHAM

It had been a long, hot day, and the cool breeze sweeping down from the hills ahead felt very good. Andrew Scott nosed his floater into the steep slope that was little more than a sheep track, and Calderbridge fell rapidly behind. With it went memories of the past three months. Back down there was the Commonwealth First Extra-Solar Expedition Training Establishment, a mouthful that had defied contraction, and which Scott and his crew knew, among themselves, as Star Jump Base.

A rugged three months it had been, but absorbing, too. Every day, six days a week, Scott and his hand-picked forty-nine had spent eight hours solid in the Whirligig, the huge mock-ship which spun continuously on its long axis to give the peripheral gravity-push that was a precise imitation of the magneto warp effect. They had gone through every imaginable ship operation, again and again, until it had become second nature for them to stand, climb and perform in a little world where ' down ' was ' out,' and Coriolis forces did strange things to the least movement of hand and arm. This was what they would have to stand up to during the five year jump to Tau Ceti, and, presuming success, all the way back, too.

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This was the time, if it had to be, for a man to break. Now, not later.

But psycho-selection had done well. Every man had been under close and continual observation, and not one had failed. Scott nodded, approvingly, to himself, his stern, homely face softening into a smile. A good crowd, a crew for a skipper to be proud of. Then he pushed that thought away, firmly. No pride now. That could come later, ten years later, when the ship came back.

He gave an eye to the magnificent scene around him, to the piled hills bathed in sunlight and wrapped in green, the narrow passes choked with violet shadow, and the cool air rich with the scents of life. This was Wordsworth country, and over yonder to the South West was Wordsworth's old home, Grasmere. Scott was anything but the poetic type, but he could feel some of the magic of this land. More in his line was the effortless magic of the floater as it purred over the rocky path, sensitive to his least touch. A beautiful job, even if he had not had much time to use it, up to now. Admiring it, his eye went to the plaque on the dashboard.

There it was, the rainbow-in-a-ring insignia of the project. On a disc the size of a penny the black outer rim of infra-red faded inward through the spectrum, to orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and into the black spot centre of ultra-violet. Based on the optical effect experienced on passing through the strain of magneto warp, this was the symbol of the Star-Jump project. It was to be seen everywhere on the base, in every room, cabin, office, and on every bulkhead of the mock-ship. He had a duplicate of it banded to his right wrist.

" Damn the Project !" he said, suddenly, and eased the floater to a crawl. " What's the matter with me, that I can't forget it for a few days ?" He frowned as he faced his own question squarely, and answered it as honestly as he could. " Fact is, Andy, old son," he muttered, " you're afraid to think of what's ahead. You're afraid to meet Belle again . . . and that's ridiculous, isn't it ?" Said out loud, it was silly that he should be dreading meeting again the girl he had once been in love with. But, silly or not, there it was. He pulled the floater to a stop, and the four motors cut out, automatically letting the machine subside on to its idle wheels. He groped for a cigarette, sucked it alight, and wrestled with his feelings.

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Ten years ago they had been a threesome, Andy Scott, Ken Parker and Belle Lowry. Hand in hand, good comrades, they had gone together straight from University into Space-Service, the up-and-coming new field for adventurous youth. They had romped through the prelims together. But three was an odd number. Someone had to lose. Belle and Ken had shown special promise in psycho-dynamics. Andy, with his hot temper and impulsive strength, had dipped on that but had come out high in action-initiative-performance tests. The outcome was inevitable, and Andy had been heart-broken, for a while.

Scott flipped his cigarette into the road, and smiled, grimly, at the memory. It had been hell, but he had done the sensible thing and made a clean break. In ten years he had met neither of them again. In ten years he had gone far and fast. Rumour had it that Ken Parker had done well, too. There had been, in fact, a rumour to the effect that Parker was intimately concerned with the Star-Jump project. Scott had disbelieved that one, until this very morning, until the letter had come. He took it from his wallet now, although he knew it by heart.

'Dear Andrew' it began . . . and that had told him, at once, that it was from Belle. To everyone else he was either Captain Scott, or 'Andy,' depending on the circumstances.

'You complete your training today' it went on. 'Unless you've already made other arrangements, why not spend a few days with us. We're quite near, and we'd love to have you.' And that was all, except for directions on how to find the Parker place. Judging by them, Ken Parker had gone to some trouble to get away from the roar of civilization. Scott folded the note again, put it away.

It was too pat. He hadn't any other arrangements. The prospect of a few days relaxing in peace and quiet was appealing. And he would like to see Belle again, certainly. But suppose there was more to it than that? A lot could happen in ten years.

"Damn it!" he said, suddenly. "What's the matter with me? I'm not a child. I can look after myself, surely?" Throwing the problem away, he started his motors again, leaning on the half-wheel so that the floater nosed into the steep slope and began to climb. It did occur to him to wonder why it was that he couldn't visualise Belle, that another picture got in the way when he tried it, but that was only for a moment. Then he gave all his attention to the tortuous track, keeping an eye out for a steep left-hand side road.

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There it was. Easing back, he spun the half-wheel, and the floater tilted to ride the steep, stony road.

"Hi, mister!" the shrill voice took Scott by surprise, and he peered, to see a small boy, with a shock of yellow hair, and a faded blue shirt, perched on the high bank, just ahead. Blue jeans were smothered in dust, and it had been a hot day. Scott felt an immediate sympathy.

"Hello, there," he called, grinning, "You want a lift somewhere?" He drew to a stop, and the motors whined into silence as the boy came scrambling down the bank-side. He pushed the door open, and the boy clambered in, settling himself on the cushions. "All right, now? Where to?"

"Funny!" the boy said, scornfully. "There isn't anywhere else to go, on this road." Scott felt the grin die on his face as conflicting emotions surged in his mind. He looked at the boy again, more closely, at his blue eyes, his dusty freckles and scornful expression.

"Your name Parker?" he asked, and the boy sniffed.

"Course!" he said, shrilly. "I'm Jeremy Parker. I live at the end of this road; *when* we get there." Scott reached for the starter-button, held it down until the whine settled to a hum, leaned on the wheel, and sent the floater on into the next bend, his thoughts whirling. This was Belle's boy. This, with a little twist of fate, could have been his own son. It was a shaking thought. He kept his eye on the road ahead, trying hard not to be critical. As a bachelor, he had nothing but theories on children, but he felt a growing certainty that he would have raised a son a bit differently from this. Still, he shrugged, it was easy to be clever about things like that. Lord knew what kind of a father he'd be.

"Is it far?" he asked, as man-to-man as he could.

"Not straight, it isn't, but this ole road goes all the way round the corners," Jeremy explained, still with scorn. "Will this car go fast?"

"It's going quite fast enough for me, at the moment."

"My Dad has a sky-boat. It goes as fast as anything. A lot faster than this ole car." Scott pressed his lips together, firmly, and took a deep breath.

"I have a ship," he said, quietly, "that goes a whole lot faster than anything you or your Dad has ever seen."

"I know about that," Jeremy nodded, cheerfully. "My Dad tole me. He knows all about it."

"Do you know who I am?" Scott asked, with genuine curiosity.

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" Yes. You're Andy Scott. You're a crew-man on the Star-ship." Scott felt himself begin to boil, gently. What it was he didn't know, but there was something about that shrill, sneering voice that was rubbing him on the raw. On the ship, in training, he had made a great point of stressing that he was commanding officer in name only, that he was one of the fifty, all working together. A crew-man, in fact. But that was a vastly different matter from hearing it said by a brat of nine, and in that tone of voice.

" I'm the Captain of the ship," he said, coldly. Jeremy squirmed in his seat, with a reckless disregard for the upholstery.

" You're a crew-man," he repeated. " My Dad tole me. He knows all about it. He's the per . . . the per . . . son . . . nel co . . . or . . . nator. He could sack you, any old time, he could."

Personnel co-ordinator ! Scott stiffened. So Ken Parker was as big as that, now. He could see his knuckles white on the wheel, and past them the rainbow ring plaque winked at him. Steady now, he told himself, relaxing. This is no way to go on. Although his left arm ached with the desire to fetch Jeremy a stiff backhander, he forced a smile to his face.

" All right," he said. " Let's not go on with that. But you still didn't tell me how much farther it is."

" Can you stop, here ? I want to get off." The boy put his hand to the motor-switch on the panel, and, quick as a thought, Scott slapped it away.

" Don't touch anything," he warned. " You don't know what you're doing. Never fool about with things you don't understand. That switch would stop the motors."

" Well ? That's what I wanted it to do. I want to get off."

" All right." Scott hauled back on the wheel, and the floater eased to a stop, the motors cutting automatically. Jeremy was intrigued.

" Why did they do that ? '

" Because," Scott explained, patiently, " the machine is riding on down-jets. If they ran while the machine stood still, they would make a draft, kick up a dust, and I'd get hot air in the intakes. So, as soon as I pull to a stop, the motors cut out. When I want to start again, I cut them in, and get moving. As soon as I'm moving along, they stay running. All right ? Now, why this sudden urge to get off,

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just here ?' Jeremy fumbled in a trousers pocket, and then turned to point up the bankside.

" Over there," he said, " is a short cut. I could get home, that way, in ten minutes easy. But the road goes round in a big bend. It's a long way."

" All right," Scott nodded. " That sounds reasonable. You think it would be quicker to walk ?" He looked back at Jeremy, and saw that he was toying with a huge pocket-knife, folding it up to slip back in his pocket. The boy grinned at him, cheekily, and so infectiously that Scott felt himself smile back.

" Bet you," he said, " that I can get home quicker than, you."

" And I'll bet," Scott grumbled, " that there's a catch somewhere, but I'll take you on. Out you get." Jeremy slid out, slammed the door, and scrambled up the side of the road to the bushes along the top.

" Ready ?" he called. " All right . . . go !" and he was gone.

Scott, still grinning, pressed the starter-button. And nothing happened. He frowned, and hit the button again. Still nothing. A lightning glance at the panel showed nothing amiss. Suspicion flared in his mind. Grubby fingers . . . a pocket-knife . . . a sudden bet . . . he leaned over, twisting his head to peer under the edge of the panel by the button. He saw a thick bunch of wiring, and shiny copper ends where they had parted before the slash of a keen blade. Instant, furious rage flooded his mind. He jerked back, and hit his head a crack on the edge of the panel that made him see stars for a moment. Imagination conjured up a picture of the brat, in the bushes, somewhere, laughing himself sick. Scott shook with the violence of his rage, his jaw clenching until it hurt.

His wrathful eye caught the rainbow-ring on the panel, and it was like a cold-water douche. In a moment, he was icy calm. Easy now, he told himself, this is not the way. The commander of a Star-Ship doesn't fly into a rage, no matter how great the provocation, even if he is naturally cursed with a ready temper. It had been his life-long cross, and he had fought it successfully so far. Was a snip of a nine-year-old going to beat him, now ? The momentary pause was enough. He went into action. Trained fingers found the repair-com-

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partment. Tools clinked and jerked. With urgent haste he scraped, twisted, joined and taped, tested and tried, and, within ten minutes, he heard the powerful boom of the motors again. Leaning on the wheel, he put the floater into the bend on the road, grinning grimly to himself. The machine banked, and swung round, its storming drafts flattening the grass and bushes on the road-verge. Another ten minutes of screaming speed, flinging round the dog-leg bends in the rough track, brought him out into a clearing, and he eased back to a more reasonable pace.

The road led ahead on to a square of concrete the size of a tennis-court. For Parker's sky-boat, he reasoned. Beyond it lay the house, snuggled into the side of the mountain. No log shack, either, he thought, as he glided to a stop, and got out. Here, full in the light of the evening sun, it was warm. He slipped out of his uniform jacket, threw it over his shoulder, and went toward the house, wondering if Jeremy had, in fact, beaten him home. It was a long, low, two storey building, brown and green, with windows shining in the sunlight, and three steps leading up to a sun-porch. As he reached the foot of the steps, Belle came out, and stood there, waiting for him. He knew her at once, and realised that the years had been generous to her. That was the immediate impression. Hard on its heels came the second look, and involuntary hesitation, at sight of her costume. Her shorts were the briefest he had ever seen. The wisp of stuff across her bosom fought a hopeless battle against the maturity it was supposed to contain. And sandals. And that left a lot of Belle in very plain view.

" Andrew !" she said, warmly, " it was good of you to come. It's nice to see you, after all these years." She put out her hand, and he realised, foolishly that he had come to a stop, with one foot on the bottom step. Pulling himself together he went up the steps, took her hand.

" Nice to see you, too, Belle," he said. " I haven't come at the wrong time, or anything, have I ?" She frowned, lightly, still holding his hand.

" Heavens, no !" she drew him near, then put her arms round his neck and pressed herself close. Without knowing quite how it happened, he found her lips on his, and his arms round her. After a dizzy moment, she drew her head back to look up at him, still snuggling close.

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" You've changed a bit," she said. " But for the better. You look more mature, and much more capable than you did." He stared into her eyes, and felt a ridiculous urge to say the same. Belle of old had been something of a tom-boy, casual and forthright. This clinging, sensuous creature was something quite different, and much more provoking. Little flames began to burn in his veins. Then he saw the silver chain around her neck, and the disc which lay against her warm, tanned skin, and the colours cooled him. He smiled, and stepped back, letting go of her, gracefully. As he moved, there was a quick step, and he turned.

Ken Parker had changed, too. Never a very robust man, he had shrunk, in the years, and had acquired a stoop. His face was thinner, and set in a vaguely suspicious expression. Or was that because he had come out in time to see that embrace? Scott wondered, even as he put out his hand.

" Ken! Good to see you again, and thanks for inviting me. Nice quiet place you have, up here in the hills. I like it."

" Thank you, Andrew. We like it, too. The invitation was from Belle, you know, but you're welcome. Excuse me for being abrupt, but did you see Jeremy on your way. I asked him to keep a look out for you."

" So !" Scott grinned. " I did beat him, after all, then. Young devil. He sabotaged my machine, you know."

" I beg your pardon," Parker's voice was chilly, now. " What are you talking about? Jeremy sabotaged your machine ?"

" That's right." Scott eyed Parker, carefully. This could be an unpleasant moment, he thought. Parker was the big noise behind the scenes, on the project. He would be a bad man to cross, possibly. " Look here," he said, " I'll tell you just how it happened . . ." and he described the encounter, omitting as much as he could of the boy's offensive ways. Parker's face was coldly thoughtful.

" You say he asked to be put off, and spoke of a short cut. Describe the place where you put him down." Scott recalled what he could of the land-marks, and gave them. Parker frowned.

" That," he said, quietly, " is just about the worst place anyone could pick, to go afoot, even in daylight. And it will be dark in half-an-hour. Of course, Jeremy knows the locality

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very well. He may be all right . . ." The sentence hung there, and lengthened into an uncomfortable silence. Scott glanced at Belle, and then back to Parker again.

"What are you getting at?" he demanded. "Are you suggesting that I beat him over the crust with an iron bar, and tossed him out, or something? I might tell you I had every provocation to do that. Bad-mannered little tyke!"

"Yes," Parker said, coldly. "you have a history of impulsive rage, Scott. It is on your record card. And the suggestion of violence came from you very promptly. And Jeremy is not home yet." He spun on his heel, and went back into the house, a thin, stooped figure, in white drill. Scott turned to Belle, keeping his temper with an effort.

"That's a hell of a thing to say," he growled. "Suppose that kid of yours gets himself into an accident of some kind . . . I'm to blame, according to him."

"Don't worry any more about it, just now," she said, taking his arm. "We'll just have to wait and see. Come and I'll show you your room."

She went before him along a passage, upstairs, and to a room which was cool, and simply furnished. He dropped his jacket on the bed and came where she led him, to big double windows, and out on to a low balcony. Green turf stretched away to the trees. The warm grey of the mountain lifted up, high above, its peak catching the last sunlight.

"What's that?" he pointed over to the right, to a long low shed-like building, separate from the house.

"Laboratory," she said. "Ken spends a lot of time in there, and doesn't like to be disturbed when he's there. Never mind that, now." She went back into the room and sat on the bed. "Now, do you have everything you want? Dinner will be in half-an-hour. No need to change, for us. We're not very formal."

"I'd like a shave, and wash," he decided. "And a clean shirt, too. I'll get my bag. It's in the car."

He went off, finding his way out quite readily, and noting that it was already beginning to darken. He hoped Jeremy would have the sense to get home safely. When he got back to the room again, he found Belle stretched out on his bed, quite at ease. She looked even more attractive, there, her golden-tanned near-nakedness emphasised by the paper-white counterpane. He put his bag down on the little dressing table,

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opened it, and began peeling off his shirt, wondering again just what he was letting himself in for, and why Ken Parker had seen fit to stress that the invitation had come from her.

" Quite a retreat you have here," he commented. " It must be very quiet for you and the boy."

" Just me, most of the time," she said. " Jeremy is home only for the night. Ken will take him back to his Aunt Esther in Keswick, tomorrow, after lunch. He goes to school there, you see. But let's not talk about them. Come and sit by me, and tell me how you've been doing, all these years, Andrew." With some misgivings, he approached the bed and sat, looking at her. Her hair was still as silky as ever, he thought, like fine-spun butter. She smiled, put up an arm to rest on his shoulder, and began to draw him down. The touch of her hand on his naked shoulder tingled. He took a deep breath, and took her hand away, gently.

" Shouldn't do that," he said. " You're a very lovely woman, Belle, and you know how I used to feel about you."

" Used to feel ? Not now, then ?" She propped herself up on her elbows, smiling. " Is it all dead, Andrew ? Nothing left at all ?"

" What sort of an answer do you want to that ? " he demanded. " You're very attractive, but don't take too many chances with it. I'm human, you know. You might easily get caught up in something you'd be sorry for, afterwards."

" You didn't answer me, Andrew. Do you feel anything for me, at all ?"

" Of course I do. If I wanted to, I suppose I could feel quite a lot that I shouldn't. But I don't want to. Because you're married to somebody else.

" That was very logically and sanely said," she murmured, holding out her arms to him. " So we're just good friends. And you may kiss me, for the sake of old times." Her lips were warm, and eager, and unrestrained. And yet . . . he drew back, puzzled, as she sat up, swung her long legs off the bed, and went to the door. " Bathroom at the end of the passage," she said. " You'll hear a gong, five minutes before time for dinner," and she was gone.

Now what the blazes is wrong with me, he thought, as he went through the routine of washing and changing into a clean shirt. And what sort of conversation was that ? Quite apart from wondering how on earth he had managed to keep

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calm in the face of deliberate provocation, he had sensed something askew about this whole affair. Belle had been acting. Of that he was quite certain. But why? Why would any respectable married woman try to tempt a male guest into indiscretions in such circumstances? He was still trying to find a sensible answer to that when he went downstairs to dinner.

It was a quiet meal, for the most part. Belle had changed into black velvet, which suited her. Parker had exchanged one white suit for another, and his thin face was still preoccupied with that suspicious look. Habitual, Scott decided, as there was no longer any worry about Jeremy, who sat between his parents and kept a well-mannered silence. It was Belle who said,

"You can't have worked so very hard, Andrew, over the past months. You don't look a bit worn-out, to me."

"It's a good point," he admitted, cheerfully. "I've been curious about it, myself. Fact is, we've all put in a strenuous training period, and we should all be thoroughly whacked, but we're not. Last week, as a matter of fact, we were in the Whirligig for the whole time . . . not just eight hours a day, but the whole of the week, and working a full rotary shift routine . . . breakdowns, accidents and all the emergencies the test gang could throw at us, but we came out feeling quite fit. The only theory I can dig up . . ." he noticed that Parker had become suddenly alert, and interested ". . . is that the design of the ship helped. It's beautifully planned. Everything just where it ought to be."

"But surely it was a bit crowded, for a whole week?" Belle queried. "I mean, you have observers, don't you?"

"That's a point, too," Scott nodded. "Every man, including me, had his own personal observer, keeping track of his reactions, doing the job along with him. We called them 'The girl-friends'."

"What an odd idea. Why that?"

"Because they were all girls, of course. Well, young women, anyway. You mean, you didn't know? But surely," he turned to Parker, "you knew. Jeremy said you were the personnel co-ordinator."

"That is so," Parker nodded, calmly. "There was a definite purpose for that. Those women were . . . are . . . highly trained staff. You found, I think, that you had to

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explain everything you did to your observer, so that she would understand? Yes? And I think you will find that this helped you to grasp the details better, for yourself. There was, too, the element of 'show-off' which the normal male feels in front of an attractive woman. That helped."

"I see!" Scott thought over this, mildly irritated to find that he had been manipulated, but admiring the ingenious idea, just the same.

"Are you telling me that fifty of you were shut up, for a week, day and night, with fifty attractive young women?" Belle demanded, in mock indignation. "That was asking for trouble, wasn't it?"

"Don't be silly," Scott told her, loftily. "We were too busy to get up to any funny business. Besides, we were all highly trained people."

"As if that had anything to do with it," she scoffed. "'I'll bet you had the time of your lives, among you. But it must have been crowded, surely?"

"Not a bit," Scott said, and was suddenly prompted to wonder about that. Strange, it had never occurred to him before. And there was another point, that he thought of just as Parker rose to leave the table. "You know, Ken . . . if ever they plan a relief ship, you have your spare crew already trained. Those girls could run that ship every bit as efficiently as we could, now."

"Not my concern," Parker said, rather hastily. "You'd better put it up to the Council. Excuse me. Belle, I shall be going back to Calderbridge, right away. I'll be back for lunch tomorrow."

"Very well, dear," she rose, and went to peck him on the cheek, affectionately. "Take care of yourself. Come, Jeremy, it's high time you were abed."

Left alone, Scott poured himself some more coffee, and reviewed the past few hours. In the midst of his bewilderment, he heard the whine and scream of rotors as Parker took off in his sky-boat. It added point to the whole mixture. Something very peculiar was going on. Jeremy had changed, now, into a normal and quite well-behaved little boy. Belle had been positively demure, at dinner, but her questions had been pointed. And now his host was buzzing off to Calderbridge, at this time of night, leaving Belle all alone with her guest.

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Without being in any way expert at social graces, Scott felt certain that this was not what usually happened. Belle returned, in the middle of his puzzlement, with a bright smile, and led him to the lounge.

There, his bafflement increased into worry, for she contented herself by sharing the comfortable settee with him, and gossiping away, harmlessly, about the past, and the good times, and the silly ones, they had all had, together. It was pleasant, but he found it hard to believe that this was the same woman who had made advances to him, from his own bed. Or had he imagined the whole thing? When the clock stood at eleven, she yawned, prettily, and excused herself.

"I could sit here all night," she smiled, "but there'll be another day tomorrow. I'm going to bed. My room is next to yours, Andrew. Give me ten minutes, and then you can come and tuck me in and kiss me goodnight."

"Is that what you want?" he asked, bluntly.

"Naturally. That's why I said it. Why not?" Why not, indeed, he mused, after she had gone. He gave her the ten minutes, and followed her. Her door stood open. She was in bed, sitting up, reading.

"That's good," she said, as she saw him, and put down her book to hold out her arms. Again, the kiss was warm. Affectionate, that was the word he was groping for. And nothing more than that. She settled back, snuggled down, and he stood for a moment, wonderingly.

"How can you be so sure?" he asked, at last, and she put her head to one side, on her pillow.

"Sure of what?"

"Sure that I won't take advantage of what you seem to be offering."

"Am I offering anything? Is that what you think?" she sat up, curiously eager to know. Her negligee gaped, revealingly, but his eyes were caught, at once, by the rainbow disc she wore, even now. He put out a hand to take it.

"I don't know whether you're playing with me, or what," he said, roughly, "but so long as I have this on my mind, you're wasting your time."

"Ah well," she lay back, sighing. "You can't say I didn't try. Good night, Andrew."

It was long before he did get to sleep, and he was no nearer making sense then than he was when the sun caught his eye

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the next morning. A glance at his wrist told him it was just on six, and he would have rolled over and gone to sleep again, but a knock on his door made him sit up.

"Come on, slug," she said, gaily. "We're going for a swim. You want to come with us?" She had a robe around her, and Jeremy's freckled face peered past its folds. This was a different Belle again, with a bright eye and lively step, much more like the girl he had once known.

An hour later, they were splashing and gasping in the icy waters of a lovely pool about half a mile up the side of the hill from the house. Scott felt on top of the world, now. This, he thought, was the life. Healthy, fit, and well aware of it . . . and to the devil with the weird antics of puzzling people. The sun was quite warm, once they were out of the water and on to the strip of white sand that fringed it. Jeremy, rubbed down and wearing only sandals, went off into the bushes to explore. Scott saw nothing amiss in that. For a nine-year-old, why not?

But his troubles sprang into life again, as Belle calmly proceeded to shed her scanty suit, to rub down with the towels they had brought, and then to stretch out on the robe to sun herself.

"You, too, Andrew," she commanded. "Get some good, healthy earth-type sun, while you have the chance." He thought a moment, then, shrugging, he stripped and flopped on his stomach by her side.

"All right," he said, flatly. "This has gone far enough. What about some straight answers, eh?"

"You haven't asked any questions," she said, passing him a cigarette. "So how can you get answers?" He lit up, drew a deep lungful.

"What's the game?" he demanded. "Who's trying to do what, to who, and why? To begin with, why did you invite me here?"

"Because I wanted to see you again, of course."

"And that's all? I don't believe it. There's more to it than that. I may look like a fool, act like one . . . even talk like one, at times, but I'm not a fool, believe me."

"Who are you trying to convince?" she chuckled, rubbing her shoulder on his. "Who said you were a fool, anyway? I've never said it, nor thought it." He frowned, in silence, and after a while she went on. "You'd never put a thoery

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of your own above and beyond common humanity, would you?"

"I don't know what you're getting at," he admitted, "but I get the vague impression that you're comparing me with somebody else . . . in my favour."

"Go on," there was a quiet intensity in her voice, now.

"And the only other person who can come into it, so far as I see, is Ken. Belle, are you happy with him?"

"There speaks the bachelor," she said, with a chuckle that was almost a sneer. "You think that's a question that can be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no,' don't you? But when you've lived with a person for years, through the ups and downs, it's not as simple as that. A person is many things, at many times, and some of them you like, some you don't. I know that sounds awful, but it's true. There are times when Ken scares me half to death with his absolute devotion to a theory. Nothing else matters, when he's like that. Not me, nor Jeremy, nor anything!"

"I can understand that," he said grudgingly. "It would be the same with me, in my job. I might count one of the rest of the trial crew as a very good friend, you might say, but if he didn't come up to the required standard, I'd have to reject him. That's what tests and trials are for . . . to eliminate personal bias."

"You sound just like him," she rolled over on her back, shutting her eyes to the sun. "But I wonder how either of you would react . . . if *you* were being tested, by someone else. Me, for instance?"

"I should feel like a bloody pawn," he said, grimly. "Is that why you invited me? To apply a test of some kind? And who are you testing, him, or me? And what has it got to do with you and me being here together, sunbathing, nude?"

"Does that bother you? About us being here, alone, in the nude, I mean? Does it worry you, at all?"

"Not the way it ought to," he sat up, suddenly. "And that does bother me. I mean, I'm healthy, and male, and you're a very attractive woman, Belle . . . and I'm fond of you . . . but nothing happens!" She lay quite still, then began to laugh, and, without knowing why, he joined in. He was tempted to think he was becoming hysterical. After all, here he was, sprawling in the sun, with a very lovely, quite nude woman . . . and laughing? When she could speak

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again, she said, " Oh, Andrew. That's one for the book, if ever I heard it. You're worried because you're not worried and you feel you ought to be. You're really mixed up, aren't you ?"

" Is that what you wanted ?" he asked, coming back to his original thought. " Just what *do* you want with me, Belle ?"

" That would be telling," she chuckled. " But I'm doing all right, so far. Come on, let's get back and have a real breakfast. I'm hungry." She called Jeremy, and they went back down the mountainside. ' So far,' Scott mused, feeling sure he would go mad if he didn't get some sensible answers, soon.

After their second breakfast, he inveigled Jeremy into giving a hand to make good the temporary repair to the floater. He needed data, and Jeremy might have it. It didn't take long to discover that the boy was as bright as a button.

" You know," Scott lowered the dashboard panel back into place and began to tighten up the bolts, " I'm still puzzled as to why . . . what was it that made you cut the wires, in the first place. You knew what would happen, didn't you ?"

" Oh yes," Jeremy nodded, vigorously. " The motors wouldn't go . . . an' you'd be stuck . . . an' you'd get angry. That's what my Dad tole me to do." Even though he had half-expected something of the kind, Scott could hardly believe it.

" Your father told you to cut my wires ?"

" No . . . not that. He tole me to meet you . . . an' get a lift . . . an' to do anything I could think of . . . to make you get angry with me. I was rude to you. An' you didn't get angry. So I busted your wires."

" And then you ran off. Why ?"

" 'Cause I was frightened you might hit me."

" Didn't your father think of that, too ? I mean, didn't he warn you that I might lose my temper if you were rude ?" Jeremy fumbled in the neck of his shirt, and produced a grubby length of string, with the rainbow disc dangling from it.

" He tole me you'd get angry . . . and that I would be all right if I let you see this." Scott grinned, suddenly, and wiped his hands.

" All right," he said. " This job's done, and we've just time to go for a trial run. How'd you like to try driving, eh ?" Jeremy was delighted, and Scott had an amusing quarter of

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an hour teaching him the first feel of a floater-wheel. But his thoughts were grim, and Ken Parker came out of them very badly. Of course he knew Scott's emotional pattern, his quick, and violent temper. So he primed his small and defenceless son to taunt and goad, knowing full well that Scott valued his position as Captain of the Star-Jump project almost more than life itself. He'd do anything, rather than lose that chance. But what sort of warped mind was it that would risk the safety of his own son . . . and for what end?

Scott thought he was beginning to see that. It was pretty obvious that Parker wanted him out of his position. Whether it was jealousy, envy, or just that he was being paid to fix the job for someone else . . . that didn't matter. What did matter was that Belle was innocently complicating things. She was planning something of her own, obviously, and it seemed that she was trying to hit back at her husband, or make him jealous, or something like that. And, although she couldn't know it, that would be just the sort of thing Parker would pounce on. In fact, he quite obviously had done just that. What kind of man had Parker become, anyway, that he could use his wife's emotions to his own ends, like that?

The thought of it gave Scott a bad taste in his mouth, and the glimpse of that rainbow disc set into the dashboard stiffened his resolve. Ken Parker might be an expert at psychological manipulation—and Lord knew what he would try next—but if he was trying to break Andy Scott out of the post of captaining the Star-Jump project, he was backing a loser, that was certain. The scream of a fast approaching aircraft set Jeremy bouncing in the seat.

"There's Dad!" he shrilled. "Hurry up, Uncle Andy. I want to see him land." Scott leaned on the wheel, and they stormed up the road to the concrete strip in time to see the stubby-winged sky-boat drop down and bounce on its sprung feet. Parker climbed out, looking as hunched and withered as ever. Scott, with what was on his mind, saw the psycho-dynamicist as a sinister and perverted figure, and his determination grew even stronger.

Lunch over, the sky-boat departed again, with Jeremy and his father, to Keswick. Scott half expected another bout of intrigue from Belle, hoping he would be able to resist it, but

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she left him alone. He was in two minds whether or not to pack his stuff and leave, but all his training recoiled from such a course. Whatever Parker had in mind, he wanted to see it, to see to what depths a man could sink, and, in a way, to set the seal of conviction on something he could hardly believe, even now. Many times, during the quiet afternoon, he took the problem out again, wondering just what was behind Parker's animosity. So far as he could recall, there was nothing there. If anyone should bear a grudge, it would be more logical the other way round. To be quite fair, Scott examined this idea, too. Was he letting his imagination run loose on this ? Could there be any nicer explanation ? Each time he tried it, he came face to face with the fact that Belle had openly tried to lead him into a seducing situation ; that Parker, seeing this, had deliberately left them together in the house, overnight, in adjoining rooms. Parker wasn't blind, nor a fool. So there wasn't any other answer.

It was about five thirty, and he was drowsing on the balcony of his room, when he heard Belle approach, a chink of china warning him that she was bringing tea.

" I thought you'd fancy something about now," she said, setting down the tray. In an effort to make conversation he looked at the strip of sky visible over the shoulder of the mountain, and pointed.

" Looks as if we're going to have a storm soon. It's quite black, over that way. Not before time. This hot weather's gone on for three weeks."

" I know," she handed him a cup. " I was looking at it from the end window. It's a storm, sure enough, and a big one. Very spectacular in these parts, you know. Just here, there's a big ore deposit, attracts the lightning."

" Worried ?" he looked at her. " Frightened of lightning ?"

" I love it," she smiled, quickly, and was serious again. " But Ken isn't back from Keswick yet. He's going to run right into it, if he's not quick."

" Not to worry," Scott sipped his tea. What a woman, he thought, to worry about the safety of a swine like Parker. " He'll get a weather report before he takes off, you know. If it's bad, he won't fly. But that's a craft, now, isn't it ?" She ran out, leaving him to eye the gathering gloom from the balcony. Soon there was no doubt about the noise. He got up, to follow Belle downstairs, through the house and out into the open, to stand by that concrete apron and watch the sky-

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boat come down. It was possibly just the weather, but he felt a tension, a certainty that something was about to break. He stood well back, on the edge of the apron, and watched Belle run across the strip, to greet Parker as he climbed out. He saw something perfunctory, almost casual, about the greeting between husband and wife. Then his eyes widened as Parker turned to offer a hand to a passenger. They went still wider as he saw that it was a woman. He corrected that, cynically, as she dropped lightly to the concrete, and shook a head of glossy golden hair. A girl, and a very trim piece too, by the way she stood.

Against the gathering darkness he saw the little group break up. Parker and the girl, neat in her blue and white suit, went away across the strip to that long shed which Belle had described as a laboratory. Belle turned and came walking back to the house. Scott couldn't see her face, in the gloom, and by the time she was close enough, he didn't want to. A slow fire was beginning to burn in him.

"That's a bit much, isn't it?" he said, as Belle came up to his side.

"What?" she asked, absently.

"Your husband, bringing girl-friends home. That's what." She looked at him with a strange expression on her face.

"You shouldn't say that, Scott. She's his assistant, you know. They have lots of work to do. Very important work."

"That's a fine tale," he snorted. "Is that what he calls it? Work?" Pieces were beginning to click together in his mind, now. If this was the form that Parker had been showing, over the past few weeks, then it was small wonder Belle had felt entitled to ask a man-friend to stay, also. Scott felt trapped. Now he knew what Belle was up to, and why she had picked on him. She was hoping to prod Parker into some kind of sanity, to show him that two could play the same game. But she was all wrong, too, if she thought that Parker was going to object.

Not Ken Parker. He was keen to smash Andy Scott, to break him, and this was the tool, right to his hand. Set the boy on him, set your wife on him . . . and if those fail, flaunt your infidelity in front of his nose. Rub it in. Use one of the project observers. Scott had recognised the uniform, at first glance, and he knew that Parker had expected him to do just that. And what would Belle do now?

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" He calls it work," she said, flatly. " And it must be highly important, too. He has that girl over here almost every week-end."

" Damn it, that's not fair, either," Scott growled. " Those girls worked all the way through, with us. We needed our week-ends off, so I'm sure she does."

" What she needs !" Belle snapped, in sudden irritation. " Who cares ? What about me ? I have needs, too, you know." She clutched his arm, and then let go. " I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." She brushed past him and went in. Scott followed, slowly, up to his room, to the balcony.

The storm-wrack was beginning to pile up, now, over the shoulder of the mountain, and the black was split by needles of light as the distant lightning struck. It was weather in perfect keeping with his mood. He turned, suddenly, to find Belle standing by him, in a loose robe, eyes aglow and her long hair on end.

" There will be lightning, and then rain," she whispered. " Big icy drops. Have you ever bathed in the rain, Andrew ?" A huge flash seared the dark, then another. Before he could count, thunder shattered the stillness. " That was a good one," she said, leaning out, " let's have another . . ." and again the blackness was split, leaving ragged after-images on his retinas. Then another, and again, and the fiery swords danced and spat, up and down the mountainside, leading the barrage of crash and rumble like a flame-wand conducting a monstrous timpani. It was thrilling, deafening, exciting. Scott saw Belle, against the recurring flashes, staring up into the night with a look of rapture, almost madness. He could feel something of her madness himself, as he stood there.

Now the flashes were further apart, and the storm began to march away, tossing bolts here and there with a prodigal hand. He felt a cold drop on his hand, and another on his face, and then a hissing noise, soft at first. It grew. It became a solid drumming, a tattoo on the roof over his head.

" This is it !" she cried. " I'm going out. Come on, Scott. You'll like it." Without waiting for him, she slipped off her robe, and in her swim-suit she went over the balcony in a scramble, to drop down to the grass. He heard her shrill gasp of shock and delight, and made up his own mind. Within seconds he had shed his clothes, dragged on his trunks, and was clinging to the balcony, looking for her. The rain was a misty

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wall of grey-green now, beating on the grass. She came back to the balcony, to look up and call.

" Come on in. It's lovely !" Her hair, sodden, striped her face with lines of dark yellow, and her skin shone with wet. He grinned to her, swung a leg over the rail, and dropped to the grass. Within two steps, he was soaked, shocked and tingling all over. She came close to him, blowing the water from her nose.

" You look like a witch," he yelled, and she shook her head so that the hair flew. Putting out her hands, cupped, she caught a little pool in each palm, and then slapped them together in his face. Then she ran, and he ran after her. He lost her completely within a yard. He was all alone in a waterfall, in a world of falling grey-green wetness. And he wasn't sure, but he suspected he'd lost his bearings, too. Stopping to think, he decided that the house must be back there, and that shed thing over that way. The shed thing. The idea stuck in his mind.

He went, steadily and carefully, that way. Quite suddenly, all the wild exhilaration had gone, and he was coldly intent. The grey-green became darker, became the black bulk of something solid, and then he was out of the rain and under the overhanging roof of the shed. In a dark tunnel, with a board wall one side, and a wall of water on the other, he crept along. And there was a glow. It grew brighter. It was a window. He slid along to it, eagerly, but was disappointed to find that it was shaded, so that he couldn't see inside. Nor could he hope to hear anything, over the hissing roar of the rain. He went to move on, and stopped, as a shadow showed, and crossed the white surface.

Slim, but with curves. A woman, and undressed. Belle, possibly. She could easily have got there before him. But, he looked again, it couldn't be ; this shadow had fluffy masses of hair. Dry ! All other considerations dropped from his mind, in that instant. He burned to know what was going on in there. He dared not try to guess. Catlike and intent, he went on along the wall of the building, groping in the gloom away from the window. He found a door, tried it, stepped inside, stealthily, shut it. He was in the dark, but he could see, ahead, a thin thread of light indicating another, inner door. He stepped to it, felt for the knob, turned it, eased the door a fraction, and listened.

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". . . but the third, and final stage of the experiment appears to be in some jeopardy due to inclement conditions . . ." That was Parker's voice, and it sounded as if he was dictating. Scott gritted his teeth. That would be the day, he thought, when Ken Parker would fly a highly trained psychodynamicist all the way out here to take dictation . . . and in the nude ! The last thought knifed in his mind, and his hand shook on the door-knob. Then he heard Parker change his tone slightly.

" I'm afraid the rain has rather spoiled things, tonight, Miss Lowry, but I'd like to give it one more trial, if you would. We may not get the chance again, you know."

" Very well, Doctor Parker. Whatever you say." That voice, so well-known, put the lid on it, for Scott. In a cold fury he threw the door all the way open, stepped inside, and stood. A lightning glance showed him the scene as if it had been a film-still.

To the left, behind a desk littered with papers, where a tape-recorder spun its spools, silently, stood Ken Parker, naked but for drab shorts. His head was raised in surprise. He looked old, wrinkled and obscene. In front, from a couch by the window, the girl was getting to her feet. She wore a skimpy bikini-style costume. There was surprise on her face, too, and something else. Scott knew her well. He had always thought her lovely, but never lovelier than at this moment. Why did it have to be her, of all people ? He glared at Parker.

" I'll give you a chance to explain," he said, coldly. "Better make a good job of it, Parker."

" Indeed ?" the retort was chill. " May I remind you that this is my own private workroom, and that I am not obliged to explain what I do, to you or anyone else." Parker was quite still, watchful, behind his desk. " Just what is it that you wish explained ?"

" I want to know why she's here ? Why it had to be Susan Lowry, of all people ? And what sort of ' work ' is it that you have to do this way, half-dressed ? I'm guessing the obvious answers . . ." Scott drew a deep breath, fighting his growing rage. " I'm betting that other people will guess the same way I do, when they hear of it. Now, do you explain, or do I have to hammer it out of you ?"

" It is quite obvious," Parker's voice was an open sneer, now, " that no explanation of mine could possibly satisfy you, Captain Scott, in your present frame of mind. Go back to

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your room, get dressed, take time to cool off. We can discuss this thing, fully, at some other time. As for explaining, I fancy you will have some of your own to do." Scott breathed deeply again, then turned.

" Get your clothes on," he snapped, to Susan. " And get out of this. I'll collect you, later, and take you out of this. Never mind him. He has no right, none at all, to ask you to do this kind of thing." He watched her, keenly, almost pleadingly. He just could not believe that she was anything but an innocent tool.

" I'm sorry, Andy," she said, softly. " I can't. I'm under orders. Doctor Parker is my superior, you know."

" That'll be the day," he laughed, without mirth, " when he's superior to anybody. You do as I say. Never mind about him." But she sat down on the settee, again. Scott stared, and felt sick. He wanted to plead with her, to confess his personal interest, his affection, his love. But she was here, with Parker. It didn't make sense. He felt goaded, as if he was being driven into a corner, driven to destroy himself. He spun on Parker, and surprised a faint smile on that thin face. Too late, it came to him that this was all part of Parker's plan. Too late, now to pick up the pieces. He knew a sudden fury.

" Come out from behind that desk," he offered, whispering with rage. " Come out, and show how superior you are, Mister Parker. Come out !" And he hunched himself, eagerly, hopefully, wanting the psychodynamist to make some move, some action that would give an excuse to smash him. And Parker came, slowly and with cold deliberation.

" I think this has gone far enough," he said, and held out a hand. Scott shifted on his feet, his bunched fist already swinging, his arm braced to block a counter-punch. And he glanced at the hand Parker held out. And froze. There, in that steady palm, lay the little rainbow-disc. Scott went as cold as if he had been dipped in ice-water. Rainbow-in-a-ring. The Star-Jump. He was Captain Scott . . . notorious for his impulsive temper, which he had fought to control, all these years, and he had just offered a violence to the Personnel Co-ordinator—in the presence of a trained observer. Check, check, and double check. It was foolproof. And he was no longer Captain Scott, or Captain anything. He was out. It was as simple as that. Quite calm, now, he realised there was nothing left.

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" All right," he said, quietly. " You win. I'll go and pack my things, and leave. I suppose I shall hear from you, officially ?" He glanced across at Susan, suddenly aware of the ridiculous figure he must present, with his muddy bare feet, wet shorts, the rain dripping from his body to the floor, and defeat in his face.

" I suppose I owe you an apology, too," he muttered. " It seems hard, but I suppose you were the logical person for him to select, knowing how I feel . . ."

" Oh, Andy !" she came to him, her eyes glowing. " You were wonderful, just wonderful !" To his complete bewilderment, she flung her arms round him, kissed him, and then ran out, into the dark. He looked at Parker, helplessly.

" All right, Andy, old son. All over, now." Parker was smiling. It was a friendly smile. All at once, he didn't look withered and old, at all, but relaxed, and satisfied, somehow. " I'll explain it all, at dinner. You'd better go and dress. It's all right." Scott wandered out, into the rain that had dried to a drip or two, across the sodden lawn, to the stairs. A touch on his arm woke him from his daze. It was Belle.

" Susan told me," she said. " I'm glad." He shook his head, dazedly.

" Glad, about what ? That I made a fool of myself ? And how does Susan come into it, anyway ? That's the bit that hurts. Why her ?"

" Andrew !" she was suddenly intent. " What is Susan, to you ? Please, I must know, and for excellent reasons."

" Well . . ." he sighed. " I'll say it like this. You failed in whatever you were trying to do, because of her. I couldn't see anyone else. She's the most wonderful person I know, or ever have known. That satisfy you ?"

" You chump !" she punched his shoulder. " Why on earth haven't you done the right thing by her, then ? Why haven't you spoken ?"

" How could I ? You know this star trip is going to last ten years, at least, don't you ? How could I ask her to wait for me all that time ?" He thumped a fist on his thigh, moodily. "I've wanted to. I still want to, even now, even now . . . but what's it to you, anyway ?"

" You remember my maiden name ?"

" I think so. Just a minute. Belle Lowry . . . here !" he was excited, all at once. " Susan Lowry. But how did I miss that ? You're related, then ?"

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" Susan is my sister. My kid sister. She's two years younger than I am. She'd probably skin me if she ever found out, but I'm going to tell you, now. She always was soft on you, only you could never see her, because of me. You were a big hero, to her. You have no idea how she wangled things just to get that place as observer to you. She's crazy about you, Andrew, and I want to know what you're going to do about it ?"

" What *can* I do, Belle ? I can't ask any girl to wait ten years !"

" Forget about that. Yes, forget about it. You go and see her now, and do the right thing. I've made her up a room on the far side of yours. She's up there now. I'll wait dinner a bit, give you an hour to make your peace with her. Now, go on . . ." He went along the corridor still in something of a daze, to tap on the door, without any clear idea of what he was going to say. Then he saw her face, and there was no need for words.

The atmosphere at dinner was completely the reverse of what it had been just twenty four hours ago. The last echoes of the storm were still grumbling, a few miles away, but the four round the table were unaware of it. Parker had a glow of satisfaction on his lean face as he yielded, willingly, to demands that he explain. As a beginning, he put his palms together, and pressed, strongly.

" As you can see," he said, " I'm working hard. If I keep this up, I can tire myself . . . and achieve nothing except frustration. Silly, isn't it ? But, on a mental level, mankind has been doing just that, for years. And think of this. Andy, you and your crew spent three strenuous months in Whirligig. So did all fifty of the female observers. Yet not one of you blew up, or broke down . . . nor were you fatigued when the training was over. You yourself noticed it. That was a fair demonstration of the validity of my discovery. But I applied to the Chief Director for permission to conduct a master test. And it's done, and it has come out perfectly. Now, for what it has all been about." He put his hands down, and reached in his pocket for a duplicate of the rainbow disc. He put it on the paper-white tablecloth where they could all see it.

" Go back several years," he said, " to the nineteen fifties and sixties, when the question of tranquilising drugs began to make headline news. There was a lot of worry, and debate, and disapproval, about the use of such things as meprobamate,

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and Miltown, but the sale of these things climbed into the thousands of millions, because they worked. And, behind the publicity, quite a lot of keen biochemists were going gently insane trying to work out why. I can give you the short answer to what took years of hard work. They had to revive the old, outmoded, dated concept of ' psychic ' energy . . . to assume that a normal person generated a fixed amount of this energy, and that if he dissipated it, it was gone. Just as I was using up physical energy in pushing may hands together.

" Now, if you have a strong emotional drive to do something and at the same time a rational drive not to do it, you're in the same position that I was. You're holding yourself back, quite literally, and at the cost of great effort. I mean, you must know what it's like to keep calm in the face of great provocation ? By outward observation you don't actually *do* very much, but you can very quickly become exhausted, just controlling yourself.

" And those tranquilisers stopped that. They made a person free from the strain of having to fight emotional stress. They had a lot of not-so-nice side-effects, too, of course, and they have long since been dropped. But that effect was a puzzler. So, as I said, the biochemists revived the concept of psychic energy, and it was assumed that the drug somehow made *all* this energy available to the rational mind. No more conflict , and wasted effort. And then they began to pin down the responsible area of the brain . . . and that's where the whole thing shifted into the field of psycho-dynamics."

" Are you trying to tell me, in a round-about way, that we've all been doped ?" Scott demanded, indignantly. Parker laughed.

" Lord, no ! We left that stage a long time ago. From historical examples, we knew there were people who could channel their psychic energies . . . people who never had mental conflicts . . . people who could, apparently, keep on going for incredible periods without fatigue. All those things were related. And they were all mental. No drugging about them. So mental training was the answer. We took ideas from several places, from hypno-therapy, from subliminal suggestion techniques, and we used them in a combined method. It's too complicated to give in detail, but the simple upshot of it is this. So long as any one of you is within sight of this symbol . . ." he nudged the disc ". . . that person is quite incapable of being

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swayed by a strong emotion. Technically, it is an association-hypno-suggestion trigger which releases all the available psychic energy to the rational function."

" You mean I couldn't get into a rage, even if I wanted to, so long as I can see this thing ?"

"A rage . . . or depression . . . or any other violent emotion, yes. And here is the really big news. Not only is this technique going to be of great value to guard against stress, but, on the basis of this test we have just completed, it will be possible, after all, to send the full crew, as originally planned."

" Full crew ?" Scott stared at him. " You mean there are more crew members that I haven't met yet ?"

" You've met 'em. They have been with you all through training. On your own saying, they are every bit as competent as your men." Then Scott saw what he meant, and his first thought was for Susan. She was smiling at him, mischievously. She must have known, all along. Belle, too, he thought. That was what had been behind her order to forget all about being parted for ten years. He shook his head, slowly, as he tried to adjust to the new knowledge.

" I'm still a bit groggy," he confessed. " You were taking the hell of a chance, weren't you, inviting me up here like this. I mean, if the conditioning had failed . . .?"

" A chance, yes. But it was the perfect test, Andy. You're famous for your quick temper . . . and you used to be in love with Belle . . ."

" I wouldn't gamble anything like that on theory, not for all the tea in China !" Scott swore, fervently. He stared at that harmless-seeming ring of colours, letting his eye drift in from the red outer ring to the violet centre. Parker laughed again.

" You're not a scientist, Andy," he chuckled. " We're not 'human,' you know. With us, anything goes, in search of truth. And it was worth it."

" Yes, but hold on a minute," Scott's faculties were beginning to pick up again. " You said, I think, that within sight of that rainbow-in-a-ring, I couldn't feel *any* over-riding emotion, didn't you ?"

" That's right. Calm, cool and collected, all the time. Why ?"

" Well, I'm sorry to . . . ouch !" he winced, and looked at Susan reproachfully. " What was that for ?" Susan frowned at him, then got up.

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" Doctor Parker. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to talk to Andy, outside." Scott followed her out, wonderingly, into the lounge.

" Honestly, Andy Scott," she said, severely, " there are times when I have my doubts about you. What did you think you were going to blurt out, just then, without stopping to think ?"

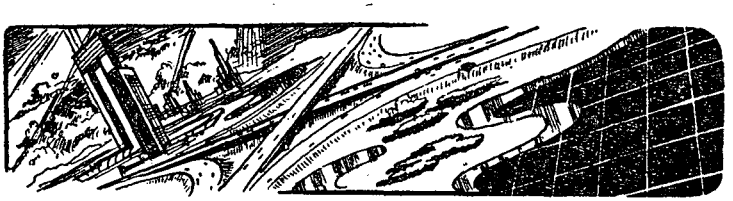
" Look here," he retorted. " I know it might be private, and embarrassing, but this isn't the time to think about that. If there's a hole in this fancy theory of his, now is the time to air it. Now, whether we like it or not, and not in a few years time, when we're half-way to Tau Ceti . . . when it's too late !"

" But there isn't anything wrong with his theory, you chump. It works perfectly, just as it is supposed to do."

" Then what was all that that happened . . . about half an hour ago ?" he demanded, and she blushed, and fumbled in her handbag.

" Oh well, I suppose you'd have to know, sooner or later. Doctor Parker isn't the only one who can apply hypno-conditioning techniques, you know, and we girls like a little bit of decontrolled emotion now and then. Ten years is a bit long to be cool, calm and collected. So we all have one of these . . ." and she held out her hand. He looked, and looked again, at the disc where the violet was ringing the rim, and the colours faded into red at the centre. " And don't you dare tell anybody," she ordered. " That would spoil everything !"

John Rackham



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We hope that now Wynne Whiteford has returned to Australia he will not forsake writing science fiction, as his latest story (written two days before he sailed) indicates that he is capable of producing a wide range of plots.

THE DOORWAY

by WYNNE N. WHITEFORD

"I've had the stuff analysed," said Conway as they sat down in the living-room of his flat. His eyes had a haunted look.

Smith's mouth twitched nervously to one side. "Was it blood?"

Conway lit a cigarette before he answered, belatedly holding the packet out.

"It was blood," he said. "Green blood."

For a time neither of them spoke. Smith swallowed noisily. Conway looked fixedly at the top of his lowered head until he raised his eyes, then leaned towards him.

"The only creature I've heard of with green blood is a thing called the *matta-matta*—a sort of turtle that lives in the mud on one of the tributaries of the Orinoco. The haemoglobin in its blood is replaced by a compound that has an atom of copper in place of the normal iron.

"This didn't come out of any turtle," broke in Smith emphatically. "I was on the spot almost as soon as it happened. The wind swung the door—its got glass panels it it, see? I hear the crash of glass, and when I go out here's

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the woman standing holding her arm with a handkerchief. The handkerchief's starting to stain *green.* I wanted to help her, but she bolted for her room and slammed her door and locked it. I picked up that bit of glass with the smear of blood on it—and that's about all."

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No. Do I want people to think I'm crackers?"

Conway leaned back. "What's she look like, this woman?"

Smith shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing very out of the ordinary. Tall. Holds herself very straight. Dark hair that hangs down over her shoulders. Always wears dark glasses, thick pancake make-up, like a woman wears when she's old and trying to look young." He looked thoughtful. "Although she's young enough, judging from her movements. Leastwise, I think so. Hard to say."

"What d'you know about her?"

"Almost nothing. She has the back downstairs flat next to mine. I've been there a couple of months, and she moved in a few weeks before me. She goes out every morning—not always at the same time. Stays out most of the day. Doesn't go out much at night. Never makes any noise when she's in her flat—no radio, nothing. You'd think the place was empty, when she's there."

Conway stood up and began to pace backwards and forwards across the room. "Listen," he said. "Have you a room in your flat where I could stay for a few days?"

"Hardly. They're pretty small flats—not like this."

Conway halted. "Would you like to stay here for a day or two, while I stayed at your place? You could tell your landlady I'm your cousin, or something."

Smith looked around the room thoughtfully. "I wouldn't mind staying here for a change. But why? You wouldn't get to see much of her."

"Maybe not. But I've got nothing to lose. I can work anywhere I have room to put a typewriter."

"But I still don't see what you aim to do."

"Neither do I—yet."

Mrs. Stein, Smith's landlady, was a small, wiry woman with grey hair pulled tightly back. She accepted the fact that Smith had to "leave town for a few days", and her main concern seemed to be that Conway would make no noise during his stay.

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"All the tenants are quiet, here," she said in a rasping voice that reminded Conway of a parrot's.

"Who has the flat alongside this one?" he asked.

"A Miss Wilson. You'll find she won't disturb you. She's been less trouble than any tenant I've ever had."

Conway settled in. The room, with its tiny attached kitchenette, was small, but comfortable enough. He was working on a series of commissioned technical articles, and while he was concentrating on his work almost any room was as good as any other. He moved the table across near the single window which commanded a view of the path leading from the front gate down the side of the house to give access to the rear flat.

About nine o'clock on the morning after he had moved in, he heard the first sounds of movement from Miss Wilson's room. He put down the files of papers he had been setting in order, and sat listening.

Footsteps, moving intermittently in the next room. High-heeled shoes. Somehow, they did not seem the normal sounds of a person just getting up—from the first, the steps were quick and definite, as if the woman had got into high gear immediately on awakening. He heard the outer door of the flat opening, and he had the bizarre notion that Miss Wilson must have slept fully dressed, even to her shoes—less than a minute had elapsed between the first sound and the last.

Suddenly, he had an impulse to forget about the whole thing. Probably Smith had make a mistake, and he had gone along with it. Then he remembered the green, copper-based blood, and he sat rigidly with his eyes on the window, waiting for the woman to pass.

His first sight of her was tantalising. It told him practically nothing—just the back view of a woman walking away from him down the path. Dark shoulder-length hair, a tan leather-fabric coat that hung straight and loose-fitting, tan shoes with medium heels. Her hands were in her pockets. She was fairly tall, and she walked with a somewhat longer stride than most women of her size—but had he seen her in the street there would have been nothing about her that demanded a second glance.

As she turned to close the front gate after her, he saw that the upper part of her face was masked by large, dark sunglasses, although the day was not bright.

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Slipping on his raincoat, he went quickly out. As he reached the front gate he saw her crossing the street a hundred yards away. She unlocked the door of a blue Renault parked at the kerb and slid behind the wheel. As he walked closer along the pavement she drove off, and he noticed that the car had left-hand drive. Probably bought in France.

His own car was parked in the other direction—too far off for him to have reached it in time to follow her. He bought some cigarettes at the corner shop and returned to his room, taking out his notebook and jotting down the licence number of the Renault.

He tried to get on with his work, but his mind kept returning to that broken fragment of glass with its edge smeared with emerald-green blood. How could a human being have blood with copper in its instead of iron? He knew that such blood existed in the South American *matta-matta*, but that was a vastly different life-form from a human. Copper-based blood suggested an entirely different body chemistry.

The woman could hardly be an isolated case. She must have had parents, grandparents, a succession of green-blooded ancestors reaching back to—when? Had evolution produced two parallel strains of people, one with haemoglobin in the blood, one with—well, would you call it cuproglobin? If so, why had he never heard of the second strain?

No, it seemed impossible that such a parallel race of people could have remained undetected in the midst of humanity all through the centuries. The only alternative was a sudden evolutionary change. Yet in some ways that was equally unthinkable.

He tried to tell himself that the whole thing had been a mistake.

About four o'clock he heard the click of the front gate, and looked up to see her coming down the path in the slanting afternoon sunshine. The light was in her face, so he was able to watch her secure in the knowledge that she could not see him. She carried a folded newspaper.

He heard her let herself into her flat. He heard footsteps to and fro across her room, a sound that might have been the opening of a refrigerator. Then silence. He listened for a

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long time, but the adjoining room might have been empty for all the sound he heard.

Next morning a knock sounded on his door, and he opened it to find Mrs. Stein dressed to go out.

"Mr. Conway," she said, "I have some trouble."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Please. My sister is ill up in Nottingham; I have to go up there. The laundry will be delivered during the day, and you will be the only person at home. I wonder—"

"Certainly, Mrs. Stein. Just let me know what you need . . ."

So he was to have the house to himself. Mrs. Stein left about nine o'clock, and at half-past Miss Wilson began moving about in her room. At nine thirty-five she walked out across the street to her car and drove off.

The laundry was delivered about one o'clock. Conway paid for it and handed over the parcel Mrs. Stein had left with him. Then he went back and stood looking at the locked door of Miss Wilson's room.

He went out into the small shed in the back garden and rummaged through some junk until he found a short length of stiff wire. He bent the end of it at a right angle by hammering it across a rusty boot-last, then went back into the house.

His heart pounding, he set to work on Miss Wilson's lock. Fortunately it was an old-fashioned mortice lock, of the same general type as one that he had seen a locksmith open in a similar way within a matter of seconds.

It took him a tense, sweating half-hour before the lock suddenly yielded. He listened to the empty stillness of the house, feeling like an actor in a third-rate film. Then, covering the knob of the door with his handkerchief, he turned it and gently eased the door open.

There was a very faint, sharp click as the door swung in. He hesitated, then stepped into the room. He was getting jumpy.

The room was surprisingly bare for a woman's room. A bed over one side, a dressing-table across the corner, one chair, a wardrobe, and three large trunks—black aluminium trunks of American pattern. A couple of newspapers lay folded on the small table under the window. Idly he

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glanced at the upper one, wondering what looked unfamiliar about it. Suddenly he picked it up.

It was the New York *Times—with today's date.* He took out his pocket diary and checked the date; he scanned the headlines, looking at column after column. There was no mistake, no misprint in the date. *It was today's paper!*

The second paper had a slightly different whiteness, the suggestion of a pinkish tint against the whiteness of the New York paper. The name on it seemed to blur before his eyes for a moment. The Sydney *Morning Herald—again with today's date!*

He wondered if he was going mad. A paper from America, a paper from Australia—both of them today's. The New York paper might just possibly have got here by jet—although it was *not* the lightweight airmail edition of the *Times,* but the ordinary version sold on the streets. But the Sydney paper—no! Twelve thousand miles the same morning! Even allowing for the fact that Sydney's time was —what was it?—ten hours ahead of London's time, there was no conceivable way it could have got here before Miss Wilson had left the flat at nine-thirty-five.

He was still standing thunderstruck when a shadow flitted past the window. He heard the sound of high heels on the steps outside, the grating of a key in the lock of the outer door.

In a sudden panic, he looked about the room for a possible place of concealment. The back door closed, and he heard her steps come to the door of the room.

Almost by reflex action, alone, he dived for the only hiding-place—the angled dressing-table. Crouching behind it, he found his eyes just level with the narrow gap beneath the bottom edge of the tilting mirror.

The door opened, and Miss Wilson stepped quickly into the room. She poised tensely, breathing rapidly as though she had been running. With a swift movement of her hand she took off the dark glasses, and as she looked about her he noticed that her eyes were large and strangely light-coloured.

Almost at a run, she crossed the room to the high old-fashioned wardrobe, flinging open the veneered doors.

Within was another door, apparently of grey metal, with a line of circular dials down one side of it. She made a rapid adjustment of the dials, pressing a button. The metal door parted down the centre and slid open, revealing a smooth

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metal cabinet inside. She stepped within it, turned, and pulled the outer doors of the wardrobe shut.

Conway waited, breathing very carefully. His thighs ached from the cramped position in which he was squatting, but he dared not move.

From the direction of the cabinet he heard a deep, almost inaudible hum that crept gradually up the scale, ending in a faint thump.

For several minutes he waited, but there was no further sound. He had the sudden fear that the girl might be unable to get out of the cabinet within the wardrobe—that she might be suffocating.

Suppose he tiptoed out of the room, then came in under some pretext. If he explained he had heard some slight sound in the wardrobe.

Cautiously, he eased his body out from behind hte dressing-table, his eyes on the wardrobe. He moved stealthily across to the door, then, on a sudden inspiration, knocked on it loudly, pulling it open and standing within the doorway as if he had just stepped in.

"Miss Wilson! Are you there?"

No reply. He strode across to the wardrobe and opened the doors. The metal doors within presented a surface so smooth that he was unable to see the dividing line down the centre. He looked at the dials. They were of some dark green material—with white figures engraved around their rims—or *not* figures, when he looked at them more closely, but signs somewhat like shorthand symbols.

He pressed the button, and the doors slid open. He looked into the cabinet.

It was empty.

There was no apparent exit to it. The floor and ceiling of it were of a fine gauze-like metallic mesh with a peculiar shimmer to it. The walls seemed like the inside of a hollow casting made in one piece, and ground to mirror smoothness.

She must have gone *somewhere*. He reached in to tap the walls of the cabinet, then stepped in to feel the back of it. He noticed a single green button set on one side wall. Was this the control to the secret exit? Experimentally he pressed it.

Instantly the sliding metal doors shut him into darkness. He began to shout in sudden alarm, then froze as the deep, humming sound climbed swiftly up the scale. Suddenly he

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had the sensation of being disintegrated in a soundless explosion. He was falling, falling down a vast darkness—then an impact seemed to strike his body all over from every direction at the same instant . . .

The doors whipped open. He turned, shaken, and stepped out.

His feet pounded on bare wooden boards. Sunshine slanted through a venetian blind across a window in a wall that should not have been there—a green wall with a table against it and a disused fireplace of what appeared to be black marble.

He had stepped out into a different room.

It was a longer, wider, hotter room than the one he had been in. Outside came a muted roar of traffic, a squealing of tyres as if cars were accelerating away from traffic-signals. He crossed to the window, peering through the slats of the blind.

The sun—it looked like the *morning* sun—struck fiercely through tall trees outside. He should have been looking at ground-floor level into the back garden of the house in Highgate—but he was not. He was high above ground-level—perhaps on the third storey of the building. Below was a wide street, tree-lined along each side, with an area of park beyond. A car sped along the street—a big American convertible with left-hand drive, and with white licence-plates with blue letters and figures.

Where was he?

A minute ago he had been in a flat in London. He looked wildly across the room. It was unfurnished except for one chair and a bed without bed-clothing. A coat lay across the bed as if it had been flung there hastily—the long, tan leather-fabric coat that Miss Wilson had been wearing.

Conway went to the window and looked down at the street again. Cars were parked along both sides of it, all of them on what appeared to him to be their wrong side.

A girl in a cotton dress walked away from the house across the broad sidewalk, and as she turned to glance up the street before crossing he recognised her as Miss Wilson. She ran diagonally across the street and climbed into a Chevrolet parked on the far side. He saw the quick forward movement of her body as she released the handbrake, the pale triangle of her face beneath the dark glasses as she looked over her

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shoulder before pulling away from the kerb. She let another car pass, then swung the Chevrolet out and away.

Conway felt the wall of the room to convince himself he was not in the middle of a nightmare. He walked slowly across the room and tried the door. It was locked.

He walked through an inner doorway into a large kitchen, past a bathroom, into a completely bare room beyond. The apartment took up the entire floor of an old-fashioned three-storeyed house, apparently built C-shaped around a stair-well. The door from the bare room at the back to the stair-well was also locked.

He went back through the kitchen. The place didn't look as if it had been lived in, except for the fact that a glass stood rim-down on the draining board, as though someone had filled it from the tap and drunk from it hastily.

He returned to the front room. A large, old-style ward-robe, painted chalk-white, had been used to contain the metal cabinet, which as far as he could see was an exact duplicate of the one in Miss Wilson's flat in London. There were shelves down one side—the wardrobe was wider than the cabinet within it by some eighteen inches—and on one of the shelves were a number of folded maps.

He took them out, leafing through them. Oil-company maps, mostly, and small directories. Uppermost was a map of Washington, D.C., then a road-map of the New England States with inset plans of Boston, New Haven, Providence and other cities within the area. Next was a street map of New York City, then a Morgan's Street-Directory of Melbourne, Australia, an A.Z. Directory of London, an Esso map of San Francisco.

Far back in the dark corner of the shelf was a bunch of keys. Nine keys of different patterns on a plain ring, some Yale type, some for mortice locks, and two of a peculiar, delicate workmanship, of a green metal that he did not recognise.

Replacing the maps, he took the keys across to the door. The third he tried opened the lock.

He was about to open the door when he remembered the sharp click that had punctuated the opening of the door in the London flat. Had it been the tripping of some alarm system that had brought Miss Wilson back? He looked carefully around the door, and found what he was looking

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for—a tiny cylinder fitted above the lintel with a hair-thin wire projecting down so that the top of the door would brush it in opening. Noticing that it was mounted on a swivel, he turned it horizontally so that the door would clear it; then he opened the door and looked out.

No sounds came to him up the stairwell. He tiptoed cautiously down, stopping for a heart-pounding minute when a step creaked under his weight.

Nothing stirred. There was only silence and gloom and the smell of cedar-wood. He went on down, keeping his weight on the sides of the steps, until he stood on the ground floor. Out through the living room, with its dark furnishing and drawn blinds and the dull gleam of brass and polished wood here and there in the half-light. Out through the front door, checking that one of the keys opened it before he pulled it shut behind him. Across the tiled veranda and down the stone steps to the sidewalk.

The air smelled fresh and clean, with a thousand mingled tree and bush scents from the park opposite. He turned right, towards an intersection where heavy streams of traffic flowed, dammed back intermittently by traffic lights that were red and green, without the intermediate yellow. Some of the cars parked along the street had green licence-plates with white figures, but most bore the white plates in blue with numbers preceded by D.C.

At the corner, he found the street he was in was indicated as Tilden Street; the long, busy road that angled across it down the hill to the left was Connecticut Avenue. Incredible though it may be, he was forced to admit to himself that he was somewhere in the United States. The DC on the cars jigsawed into place with something he had noticed when he had looked out from the window of the house— a high obelisk spearing into the sky three miles or so away, fully half-a-thousand feet of it, hazy with distance. The Washington Monument. And DC stood for District of Columbia.

It was an utter impossibility, of course. Twenty minutes ago he had been in Highgate, in London, three thousand miles away—or was it four? Yet the sun was warm on him, the asphalt hard and real beneath his feet, the people waiting at the bus-stop alive and moving. He took off his jacket and hung it across his shoulder, mopping his face with his handkerchief.

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What had he stumbled on here? A technique that could instantaneously transmit a living person thousands of miles. The maps suggested a network of such lines of transmission spreading to the farthest part of the Earth. Obviously, Miss Wilson was not the only person who used them. Who was she? *What* was she?

He began to walk quickly back to the house. He let himself in, climbed to the top floor, locked the door of the top front room from the inside, and returned the hair-trigger alarm device to its original position. He put the keys in his pocket, opened the wardrobe, and pressed the button on the cabinet. The grey metal doors slid silently open.

A moment of fear held him rigid. What happened when you stepped into the cabinet and pressed the green button? Were the separate atoms of the body disintegrated, flung across space, reassembled in the cabinet in London? But no—that was unthinkable. Was there some property of space involved which he knew nothing about?

Yet he had seen it work. Without giving himself time to think, he stepped into the cabinet, pressed the green button, heard the rising hum, the thump, felt the abysmal fall, the impact of arrival.

Still sweating, he stepped out into the sudden coolness of a grey afternoon in London.

Back in his room he poured himself a drink and sat down by the window, turning the bunch of keys over in his hand. Seven of them could have been made in America, in England, or in almost any other country. But the other two —the slender, intricate, twisted keys of gleaming green metal, with their wide ends engraved with outlandish hieroglyphs— those were the two that convinced him that everything that had happened this afternoon had not been a grotesque dream.

He thought of ringing Smith, then decided to wait. He remembered an American friend, looked up his number, and dialled it.

"Frank, how well do you know Washington, D.C.?"

"Pretty well. Why?"

"Don't they call the streets by numbers there?"

"Numbers north-south, letters east-west. Why?"

"So there wouldn't be a street called Tilden Street?"

"Yes. After they run through the alphabet they give them names in alphabetical order. Tilden's out north along

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Connecticut Avenue. Runs along the top end of the park near the bureau of Standards . . ."

When he had rung off, Conway felt as if everything had become slightly unreal. He took out his notebook and began writing down everything that had happened since Smith had come to him with the piece of bloodstained glass. The analysis of the green, congealed liquid. The description of the girl. The newspaper. The cabinets. The transference of his body from the London flat to the green-walled room in Washington. The car in which the girl had driven away. At this point, as he wrote, a light knock sounded on the door.

He closed the notebook and put it in his pocket, then answered the knock. In the passage outside stood Miss Wilson. She was slightly taller than he had thought at first, her high heels bringing her a shade above his own five-feet-eleven.

"I'm Miss Wilson—from the next flat." Her voice was slightly husky. "I wonder if you happened to pick up a set of keys?"

"Keys? Have you lost some?"

"I may have dropped them. However, if you haven't seen them—"

"Let's have a look in the passage," he suggested quickly, as she half-turned away. He switched on the light and began peering about the carpet. She stood quite still, her hands in the pockets of her coat, her eyes hidden by the dark sunglasses.

"Don't trouble," she said. "I could hardly have dropped them here without noticing."

That accent. What was it? A hint of Spanish, of Japanese? Filipino, perhaps? Yet not quite.

"Have you been long in London?" he asked.

"Three months. Why?"

"I've lived here two years." He had a fierce compulsion to keep her talking, to keep her from slipping away from him again. "I like London. The theatres, for instance."

The full red lips curved in a slight smile. "I'm afraid I haven't had the opportunity to see them."

"But that's almost criminal, living in London and not taking in the theatres. Listen! I have a friend who can get me theatre tickets any time I want them. Would you care to take in a show tonight?"

The dark glasses could have hidden any expression. The slight curve of her lips betrayed nothing of her thoughts.

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"Thank you. Some other time, perhaps," She moved again towards her door.

"You know," he said, "I'm certain I've seen you before, somewhere. Not in London."

"It's quite possible." Her hand was on the door.

"Could it have been in Washington?"

Half-turned, the doorknob froze with the sudden rigidity of her hand. She stood perfectly still. He felt his pulse drumming, and he started at the click of the doorknob turning back as she relaxed her grip of it.

"It's possible," she said. With a sudden movement she turned towards him. "Perhaps we *could* go to the theatre together this evening. It might be fun."

"Right. I'll ring my friend right away about the tickets."

She smiled. "But I don't even know your name."

"Conway—Eric."

Her smile widened. "Wilson—Alma."

Her even white teeth were curiously pointed.

He had no difficulty in getting tickets.

"I can get you two in the second row of the circle at the Comedy," his friend told him.

"That's fine." It was only as an afterthought that it occurred to Conway to ask the name of the play.

As he put down the phone he caught sight of his reflection in the wall-mirror.

"I hope the hell you know what you're doing he murmured aloud.

She watched the first act of the play with intense absorption, as though it was the first she had ever seen, holding the dark sunglasses in her hand. The lights from the stage showed her eyes, large and curiously light. But when the lights went up for the first interval Conway turned to find the glasses again hiding her eyes.

"Do you always wear those?" he asked.

"Eyestrain," she said. "I can't stand strong light—just for the present."

She preferred not to move out for the interval. "When were you in Washington?" she asked suddenly.

"Few months ago."

"Thought you said you'd been in London two years."

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Careful, he thought. "I move about a bit. Been here most of the time. I've just been trying to figure where I've seen you. I used to stay in a street called Tilden Street. Park along one side, sloping down from the street. Do you know it?"

"I know it." The dark glasses swung towards him, opaque, void, like the eyes of a vast insect. The sleek dark helmet of hair framed her face, hid her forehead, so that he could see nothing of her expression beyond the straight firmness of her mouth.

Throughout the remainder of the play she said nothing, sitting erect and immobile alongside him.

"Would you care for a cup of coffee?" he asked as they moved towards the exit.

"Why not have one at home?" She smiled. "It would be more pleasant in my flat than in a cafe. Mrs. Stein might not approve—but need she know?"

As they emerged into the sudden coolness of the night air, Conway noticed a big man in a pale grey suit standing on the far kerb. He wore dark glasses and a white Panama hat that seemed fantastically out-of-place in the West End of London at ten-thirty in the evening. As they walked down Panton Street towards the Haymarket he glanced over his shoulder, and he noticed that the man in the panama hat was walking at the same speed down the opposite side of the street, about twenty yards behind them. He felt a sudden dryness in his throat.

The vague feeling of uneasiness crystallised on the way home, when he was held up at a traffic signal. He glanced in his rear-view mirror, and noticed a 2.4-litre Jaguar waiting behind him. Another car rounded the corner, coming from the intersecting street, the swing of its headlights gave Conway a glimpse of the man in the Jaguar behind him. He wore dark glasses and a white Panama hat.

Dawdling, he watched the next traffic signal ahead. He managed to time it so that it was changing to amber just as he reached it, and tramping on the accelerator he crossed in front of the opposing traffic, leaving the Jaguar stranded at the red light behind him.

"What's the matter?" asked the girl.

"I think I know a short cut. Dodges the worst of the traffic."

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Swinging off the main road, he drove through a series of narrow streets, twisting frequently until he was sure that the Jaguar could not possibly have kept track of him. He glanced at the girl as she sat quietly beside him. Her lips were curved in a faint smile that brought all his uneasiness back to him.

When he reached their street, after having to retrace his way from a couple of dead-ends, he saw a grey Jaguar parked fifty yards from the house. It appeared to be empty. He tried to convince himself that there were plenty of cars of that type about London, but the coincidence was still too strong for his liking.

When she opened the door of her flat, she did a curious thing. She walked straight across to the window looking out on the back garden, pulled the curtain aside, and stood looking out into the darkness for perhaps three seconds. Then she drew the curtain again and went into the kitchenette. He heard the sound of a tap running, then the lighting of a gas-jet.

"Where was I when you saw me in Washington?" she called from the kitchenette.

"I don't know. Walking somewhere. Think I've seen you driving a car."

"A Chevrolet?"

"That's right. A green one, wasn't it?"

"Yes." She came back into the room and stood with her hands in the pockets of her coat. "I bought it three days ago from Cherner's."

It took a couple of seconds for the full chilling implication to seep through to him. She tapped one foot sharply on the floor, twice. A key turned in the lock. The door opened, and the big man in the Panama hat moved swiftly into the room, closing the door behind him and locking it without taking his eyes from Conway.

With a sudden change in her intonation, the girl said something that sounded like "vorak esri," and the big man made a monosyllabic reply. The girl went suddenly to the wardrobe, opened it, opened the cabinet, stepped within. She did not close the outer doors of the wardrobe this time, and Conway watched the metal doors seal her from view. The crescendent hum, the thump—and she was gone.

"What's all this?" demanded Conway.

The big man gestured towards the cabinet. "You follow, please."

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"I'm damned if I do!"

The big man took something from his pocket. It was a delicate-looking instrument of shining metal, shaped rather like a small paint spray-gun. He pointed it towards Conway.

"I must warn you to do as I say," he said. "This can be quite lethal."

Conway shrugged, and went to the cabinet. The big man kept the weapon pointed at him as he opened the doors and stepped inside. Conway pressed the green button . . .

When he emerged into the green-walled room in the Tilden Street house, late afternoon sunshine was slanting ruddily through the slats of the venetian blind. The five-hour time-difference between England and the eastern United States meant that the sun had not yet set here.

Miss Wilson was standing near the window, an instrument gleaming in her right hand. It was the same type of weapon that the big man had carried, though slightly more compact.

"I'm sorry your curiosity has led you this far," she said quietly. "I'm afraid you have come to what your people might describe as the point of no return."

"How do you mean?" he asked, moving towards her.

"You are not stupid, Eric. Nor are we." She took off the dark glasses and slipped them in her pocket. For the first time, he saw the full strangeness of her eyes, large, upward-slanting, the iris silvery and luminescent, the pupils diamond-shaped. He could not tear his gaze away from them.

"You have used the cabinets to transport yourself here. You know this is a method of travel your people do not possess. I knew *someone* used the cabinets today—and since you knew about a car I have been using here only for the past three days—"

Conway turned as the doors of the cabinet opened again. The man in the Panama had moved soft-footed beside him, the weapon in his hand flashing in a stray lance of sunlight from the blind. He no longer wore the dark glasses. Conway looked from the weapon to his eyes. They were the same as the eyes of—of the girl. It was ridiculous to think of her as Alma Wilson now.

"I regret this, Eric," she said "I'm returning home. I won't be seeing you again."

She put the weapon in a shelf in the wardrobe, and stepped into the cabinet, after making an adjustment to the dials. She

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said something to the man in the Panama hat, her voice rippling in a language that was half murmur and half song. Then she pressed the green button. The doors closed. Again, Conway heard the rising hum, the sharp thump.

She had gone home. Already, she must be stepping into the flat in London, more than three thousand miles away.

The big man lifted his weapon. "I regret this, too. Curiosity is a desirable trait, is it not so?"

"*Who are you?*"

"Let us say we are neutral observers."

"Listen!" Conway tried to keep his eyes off the weapon. "I'm not the only man who knows about you."

"Ah, no. You're thinking of Smith? The man who noticed the colour of Miss Wilson's blood? I think we have little to fear from him. We can—handle him, if it becomes necessary."

"Listen, man, we're in a civilised city. There's no chance of you killing me. Put that thing away and let's talk this over!"

The weapon was steady in the big man's hand. "You think I might have difficulty in concealing your body? There is no difficulty there. The cabinet is a gateway to many places."

Conway had edged towards the locked door. Near it was a wooden chair. Within arm's length was the light switch.

He stared at the weird, light-coloured eyes—eyes that seemed well-adjusted to dim light. Suddenly his outstretched hand brushed the light-switch down. It was down already. In an instant of time that was like an eternity, he remembered that light switches in America went *up* for *on*.

The big man had involuntarily looked up at the naked light bulb two feet above him as Conway's hand whipped back. With the light suddenly in his eyes the man in the Panama hat ducked his head, and as he lifted the weapon the chair smashed it from his hand.

Conway's second swing of the chair sent him sprawling on the floor. In a moment, Conway was at the cabinet.

The big man was just stirring, beginning to rise, as the doors shut him from view. In the cold smoothness of the cabinet Conway listened to the rising hum. Within seconds, now, he would be emerging into the London flat. Miss Wilson would never expect *him* to leap from the cabinet in her room. He would have surprise on his side, coming into the room within a few feet of her.

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The humming sound lifted. There was the sense of falling. This time it kept on, as if he were falling forever. Somewhere outside of reality he heard the humming sound rising again to a climactic thump, rising again, again, in ever swifter tempo.

Panic seized him. Something had gone wrong. Would the separate atoms of his body be lost forever in the space between Washington and London?

At last, the walls of the cabinet were smooth and solid about him. The doors opened—into pitch darkness.

Of course, it was nearing midnight in London. He caught his breath at a sickly, almost overpowering smell. *Had she filled the room with gas?*

He moved quickly from the cabinet, groping with outflung arms for the door. Strange—he should have seen the strip of light under it. Had she *sealed* the room to keep in the gas?

His knees struck something that yielded slightly, and he fell across an oval chair that seemed to be mounted on springs. He felt around it, and the hair on the back of his neck seemed to be lifting itself erect. It was not a chair. It was a warped oval shape of something that felt like plastic, floating eighteen inches above the floor without tangible support.

He scrambled away from it and cannoned into a wall that seemed to be made of smooth, warm metal. He groped along it, and suddenly a door opened beside him. Pale violet light streamed past him into a room unlike any room he had ever imagined. Outside, a broad, curved platform was bathed in that unearthly violet pallor—and beyond it towered buildings out of an ultra-modern architect's nightmare.

"I'm returning home," she had said. But—

Where was *home* to a creature who bled green?

He tried to get back to the cabinet, of course. But he was too late.

They were already in the room . . .

Wynne N. Whiteford

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Committees are already in session discussing the legal aspects of spaceflight and the Moon. Will the first man to land on our satellite claim it for his country—and, if so, will he be allowed to keep it ?

TEST CASE

by DONALD MALCOLM

When Sir Roderick Kilmuir announced to the U.N. Committee for Space Law that the British Commonwealth had successfully landed a man on the Moon, the stunned silence was almost painful. The mere click of a briefcase lock would have seemed like a rocket blast-off.

Immediately, the sedate room in the heart of Geneva was saturated with a babel of questions. When order of a kind had been restored, the head of the Commonwealth delegation gave further details.

Captain John Hamilton, in his ship *Commonwealth Hope,* had penetrated the van Allen layers and landed near the ring wall of Endymion, west of the Moon's north pole.

This fact caused much speculation. As one delegate put it, " Not even a cussed Australian (Hamilton's nationality) would drop his ship there! "

In reply to further questions, Sir Roderick admitted that Hamilton's ship was damaged, without propellant for the return journey, and that a rescue ship was being readied at the B.C. space station. Originally, the chosen landing spot had been Plato.

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Many nations other than the Space Powers—the Commonwealth, America, Russia and the Brazilian-controlled Latin American group were represented on the Committee. Resentment of the B.C. achievement was evident and, despite vigorous protests, the majority dropped a bombshell of its own by decreeing that no more manned ships were to be sent to the Moon pending the clarification of the legal aspects of the case, a precedent.

The shock wave travelled 238,000 miles to the Moon.

When Hamilton was told of the decision, he was understandably shaken. He managed to remain calm and ask what was being done about food, water and air.

At the time of the announcement—5th October, 1972—the Committee had been engaged in trying to anticipate events by formulating a law code that was to apply to the Moon and to the planets. The flight of a ship through the Barriers, as the van Allen layers were sometimes known, had put the cat among the pigeons.

Sir Roderick accepted the majority decision with great reluctance and told the packed assembly, "That the scientific and technoligical resources of the British Commonwealth have succeeded in putting a man on the Moon, is an uncontrovertible fact. For obvious humanitarian reasons, it must be accepted by the members of this Committee that we be allowed to supply Hamilton with the necessities of life until his case is decided here."

Casting his famous bushy glare around the room, he finished strongly, brooking no argument, "I know that *all* members will be pleased to support wholeheartedly this request."

The Chairman asked, "How do you intend to supply Hamilton if no more manned ships are to be allowed to go to the Moon?"

"We have perfected the orbital and landing techniques for small unmanned lunar supply vessels," Sir Roderick replied shortly, causing a further stir with this revelation.

The B.C. "request" was unanimously agreed to. The members were intelligent enough to realise that it was a demand in diplomatic clothing. Refusal to accept it would have left the Commonwealth no alternative but to rescue Hamilton, risking the provocation of war.

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The vessels were fabricated at the Commonwealth space station, in free space—this had been decided by law—and it would be perfectly legal for supplies to be loaded from the station stores, which could be replenished from the Central Base at Woomera.

Foreign scientists were very keen to ferret out details of the *Commonwealth Hope,* but Sir Roderick was giving nothing away.

To send a man through the Barriers was to expose him to the risk of serious physical danger: so the experts believed.

The van Allen layers had been detected by satellite 1958e with the use of shielded Geiger—Muller counters. The lunar probe, *Pioneer III* had telemetered back more information, and subsequent satellites and probes had added to the volume of data.

The two extensive belts, one at 600 miles, the other at about 12,000 miles, contained high velocity charged particles, mainly protons and electrons, with intense energies.

The Commonwealth was the first group to find a way of sending a man through safely.

Unfortunately, they couldn't bring him back; not just yet, anyway.

Hamilton knew that, if the chips were down, they would pull him out, whatever the consequences. In the meantime, he wasn't afraid of being alone on the Moon. It caused him little concern that he was separated from his fellow beings. This part of his psychological make-up had been taken into account when he had been chosen to pilot the ship.

But there was danger in the immense loneliness of the Moon, that had never known the murmurous journey of a bee, the crystal-fine song of a lark, the joyous union of a river with the sea, or the gentle falling of snow.

The towering walls of the crater, luminous, silent, seemed to hold up a sky brimming with unwinking stars. The Earth, a huge blue-green ball shimmering with a silvery radiance, balanced itself grandly at the horizon, and flooded the lunar surface with pale, almost colourless, green light.

Hamilton felt a tugging at his heart and he was humble in his loneliness for the Earth his home. A quiet country cottage, pleasant green fields, the arcing of trout, warm, balmy days; these things, he realised, were the sum of his wants and his needs.

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Why had he ever dared to venture into the hostile environment of space. Did something call namelessly from the stars, as it did from the Earth? It was a question he could not answer nor did he want to.

Around him was the stuff of madness, laughing out of the impassive faces of the crater walls.

He remembered the teachers who had tried to thump Latin into his head, the only bit that had stuck was something about work conquering all *labor vincit omnia.*

And work was the answer to what promised to be a prolonged wait. He confined himself mostly to selenographical tasks—the space station observatory's equipment was much more suitable for the astronomical and astrophysical side of things.

He radioed valuable data, in code, to Woomera, and it was disseminated to the various Commonwealth scientific panels.

This caused another wrangle. It was claimed that the data he was sending served to widen the gap of knowledge between the Commonwealth and the others.

Sir Roderick craftily agreed with the complaint and suggested that this be referred to a sub-committee. He hinted obliquely that as soon as the various data were correlated, they would be passed out to interested parties. Between this, and the fact that agreement could not be reached as to the composition of the sub-committee, the whole issue was sidetracked.

Hamilton soon had something more than work to occupy his mind. The *Commonwealth Hope* had come down between Endymion and Atlas, which is just south of *Mare Humboldtianum,* on the limb of the Moon. He had found a safe route over to what was still called Darkside, using the " cat."

One of the first things they sent from the station was four wheels and solar batteries, with instructions on how to build a small " cat " that would save a lot of footwork.

About twenty miles across the limb, bang in the middle of a rough minor sea, stood a building, low, flat and apparently featureless.

Hamilton was excited and, at the same time puzzled. *Lunik III* had taken the first photograph of the far side of the Moon twelve years before the initial manned landing.

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Many more photographs had been taken since. None—not even the most recent ones—had shown the building.

Did that mean that it had just been constructed, say, within the last two months? Hamilton didn't think so. Although his telescope didn't have a very high magnification, what it showed convinced him that the Building—he had started to capitalise it—had a permanent look about it.

It was there for a reason, one which required its invisibility from prying eyes in space.

For a reason he couldn't explain Hamilton didn't inform Earth. This prevented his going to examine it because his absence off the radio would have given rise to suspicion.

Every so often, he went to look at it. Within himself he knew that, one day, he would turn his back to the Earth, and go over.

The pros and cons of the case see-sawed back and forth. The lawyers seemed to be enjoying themselves although none would have admitted it.

The supply rockets arrived with admirable punctuality.

Bee-hive shaped, they weren't very big, standing about ten feet high with a base diameter of seven feet. He promptly turned four of them into little rooms and he soon had a minor base, suitably interconnected with metal cannibalised in true Clarke fashion. The pure oxygen they sent up came in very useful, providing a heady atmosphere for one room.

When Sir Roderick was challenged on his inventive adaption, he blandly replied that it was a basic human right for any person to change his abode at any time. He asserted that this was all Hamilton had done, as the crashed rocket wasn't the most comfortable of quarters. And after all, he pointed out slyly, with a twinkle, hadn't the honourable delegate done just the same thing himself a few weeks before? This allusion to the delegate's much publicised removal to a more palatial home brought forth peals of laughter in which the delegate had the good grace—and the good sense—to join in. It also served to break the temporary tension. Sir Roderick's humour was not of the malicious type.

Much controversy centred round any possible claims to the Moon. Hamilton had a quiet laugh at this. No one but he knew that the Moon had been inhabited, if it wasn't actually inhabited at the moment.

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Sir Roderick made it very clear that the British Commonwealth was not laying claim to any portion of the Moon, its natural or mineral wealth. As far as they were concerned the whole satellite was to be considered *res nullius*, free teritory, open to colonisation and exploitation by any power. This also implied that the Commonwealth would not tolerate a hands-off attitude by anyone else.

Sir Roderick reminded the Committee that, by international law, no terrestrial nation could lay claim to any portion of the Earth's land surface unless they could prove they both controlled and administered it. He quoted the case of the United Kingdom versus the Argentine over the possession of the Falkland Islands. It was patent that the former country fulfilled the conditions mentioned; the ruling of the International Court of Justice upheld the British claim. Various claim disputes over territories in Antartica were also settled under the same ruling.

Hamilton hadn't done anything dramatic like planting a flag and claiming the satellite on behalf of the British Commonwealth. He had been too grateful to get down in one piece.

Sir Roderick lucidly explained the reasons behind the B.C. decision. No one nation or group of nations could hope to establish and hold a foothold on the satellite to the exclusion of all others. The problems of building enough special ships, of constructing a sizeable colony, feeding, clothing and supplying the inhabitants and of defending the colony were immense. That way lay war with nothing for anyone at the end.

There was only one solution. Here, Sir Roderick was talking from a considerable position of strength. The Moon would have to be controlled and administered by a special body seconded to the U.N. Trusteeship Council. Travel and communication between the space platforms and the Moon would be regulated by the appointed body. Any nation could apply for a piece of Lunar real estate.

Hamilton was being pushed into the background. The supply rockets continued to land on schedule—all except the most recent one—but no attempt was made to rescue him. Not that he was unduly worried. He was too busy wondering about the building over on Darkside.

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Sir Roderick said that the B.C. scientists would be willing to give out details of the ship that had carried Hamilton through the Barriers to Luna. This bit of bait was eagerly snapped up.

The French delegate voiced the hope that countries like themselves, which had no space programme, would not be excluded from the share-out. Some land should be set aside for them against the time that they did achieve space flight.

The Brazilian delegate said that it was likely that technological aid would extend to those states which desired to participate in the conquest of the Moon. He was being very generous with something that was not his to give away.

All this was referred to the inevitable special sub-committee and an air of jolly good fellows prevailed.

They radioed to tell Hamilton that he wouldn't have to wait much longer before returning home. Enter the triumphant hero.

He decided that it was time to tell them about the building on Darkside.

Then he discovered that his transmitter wouldn't operate.

He could still receive. After his own panic had subsided, the panic down on Earth was something to hear. Entreaties, demands, suspicions, threats, questions, pleas, the lot.

He made his way over to Darkside on his "cat." There was no doubt in his mind what had blocked the transmissions to Earth and stopped the arrival of the last supply rocket.

Perhaps it was also responsible for the generation of the Barriers.

Once into Darkside, he turned the scope on the Building.

There was an opening. They were waiting for him.

He wasn't afraid, only intently curious. And there was only one way to satisfy that curiosity. He set the "cat" in motion, picking his way carefully.

Nothing changed as he approached the Building. It stood under the star-flattered sky, waiting.

Leaving the little machine outside, he entered through the twelve-foot high opening. A very faint sensation of vibration made him turn round. A panel had slid across the opening.

The interior began to brighten, as if in response to long-remembered instructions. In the middle of a smooth, metallic floor was a chair with a dome suspended above it. The wall

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beyond, from the floor to the ceiling, twenty feet above, was covered with banks of gauges, panels of relays, and other instruments.

The chair was there for only one reason, so he went and sat in it. The extentions with small, bun-shaped discs at their tips extruded from the dome and silently clamped themselves to either side of his space helmet. Behind him, certain relays clicked and gauges flickered in answer to great surges of power.

He had the feeling that no more ships, manned or unmanned, would succeed in reaching the Moon until the case had been tried.

A somnolence submerged his consciousness and he instinctively resisted, but to no avail.

The court was in session.

Donald Malcolm

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Can you visualise the sort of trouble a non-human alien would be likely to get into if he was put to work in a large departmental store ? James White presents such a vivid mind picture next month in " The Apprentice," in which the visiting alien becomes involved in some hilarious situations. Another novelette, originally planned for the 100th issue but found to be too long, will be J. G. Ballard's " The Voices of Time," a complex story built around the fact that Man is sleeping more and more as the pace of presentday life increases.

Short stories by Colin Kapp, " The Exposing Eye,"; E. C. Tubb, " Memories Are Important," ; and W. T. Webb, " The Red Dominoes," plus a fascinating fact-article by Kenneth Johns entitled " Anyone At Home ?"

Story ratings for No. 94 were :

1. The Bright Ones - - - - - John Rackham
2. X For Exploitation (conclusion) - Brian W. Aldiss
3. Lost Thing Found - - - Bertram Chandler
4. Ozymandias - - - - - Robert Silverberg
5. The Winds of Truth - - - Donald Malcolm

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Article

Although we are about to jump into space on the next step in Man's evolution, scientists are still working backwards through time towards the original building blocks from which we have sprung. It was a very different type of planet in the early days.

LIMITLESS LIFE

by KENNETH JOHNS

The strange phenomenon of life has intrigued philosophers since Neanderthal roamed the world. From fertility rites to the complexities of modern biogenetics may seem a far step; but both these examples of the human brain at work—the superstition and the science—are attempts to formulate an answer to the questions: " What is life? " and " From whence comes life? "

The additional function of fertility rites has today been translated into the attempt to improve rather than merely to increase life.

Most scientists today agree that the multitudinous life around us originated spontaneously some two to three thousand million years ago, that it required only the correct conditions and sufficient time for probability to give form to the things that swim, crawl, fly and think on this planet. No magical intervention, no special spirit would be necessary,

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only a contracting mass of gas. Once life had appeared, from then on evolution followed as surely as the thermonuclear reactions in the Sun followed a pattern.

But it is difficult to get scientists to agree to more than this.

The old saw that 'The proper study for man is Man,' has always been an arguable proposition; but in these days when its neglect is showing up in the current sociological chaos on the Earth, its importance cannot be denied. As a vital preliminary to the study of functioning man, the study of life itself, the basic life-force, must demand a growing section of our scientific endeavour. We may never fully comprehend the mystery of life, nor of ourselves; but it is frighteningly clear that we must know a great deal more—and quickly—if the world is not to slide into a final blackout.

With biochemistry breaking through into an understanding of the genes, the ultimate units of heredity in modern life, and finding them merely giant molecules whose patterns hold the key to future growth, scientists have been striving in print and convention to comprehend "What is life?"

Even the apparently elementary attempt to define life foundered on disagreement. If words serve to confuse thought, they nevertheless remain the channels of communication, and some agreement on a definition of what is life seems a prerequisite to further advance. Some scientists claim that it is impossible to define life, considering that there is no sharp division between the living and the non-living. Others state that life can be thought of as beginning when some distinctive point of complexity is attained; although this may involve an arbitrary limitation. Even flames involve chain processes which might well be called living, while viruses from plants and man can be crystallised as pure chemicals.

We know intuitively what life is. It does not necessarily involve intelligence, it involves the perpetuation of a pattern and the ability to create order out of disorder. Yet there is more to it than that.

Bernal, for the purpose of argument, considers that life is a self-maintaining chemical process restricted to a certain volume. This needs an external source of free energy, known colloquially as "food," to keep it running and, in addition, since the system may be at the same temperature as its surroundings, it needs catalysts such as enzymes to speed up and direct energy changes.

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There must also be some mechanics to ensure the living system remains a unit and, in more complex forms of life, of maintaining the individuality of different parts but still keeping their chemical relationships. Yet even such an organism is not living unless it has a means of reproduction and, to permit evolution, this must allow latitude for mutation, the not-quite-exact duplication which leads from molecule to man.

Even so, Pirie considers that the requirement of mutation in a definition of life is not necessary since it has not been proved that very ancient types of life do mutate.

He thinks that there is no rigid division between living and non-living, that the best we can do is to choose an arbitrary number of qualities that a system must have before it fits our definition of living. In saying this he really means that life is indefinable, that it is our attitude of mind towards a system that decides whether or not we consider it living.

Although it eventually may be possible to say that certain chemicals or processes are essential to life *as we know it*, this may not hold for the extra-terrestrial life we are now certain to find in the Universe away from our far-from-aseptic ball of mud.

Extra-terrestrial life presents us with the challenge of many riddles; but before we can grasp at them we must have a clearer idea of the way life itself was formed, and to do that we have, at the moment, to use the planet and the life which we know best.

The origin of life is complicated by the not-so-self-evident fact that we cannot study life as it was when it first arose. Life has completely changed the environment of this planet's biosphere, as well as itself changing. If a simple form of primeval life were suddenly to appear now it would promptly be eaten or crowded out by the more efficient modern species.

An example that points this up was the potential devastation of indigenous Australian life-forms when exposed to the onslaught of later models introduced by the early settlers. Had no control been imposed, modern animals would have obliterated the old types still living in Australia cut off from the rest of the world's development, just as the early types had been bypassed on the other continents.

If some squirming lump of primeval protoplasm was formed in the stagnant pools hidden in some overgrown garden, the neighbouring life forms—quite apart from the cats

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and dogs—would dispose of it before it had even started on the millions of years necessary for development into a life form remotely as complicated as the multi-cellular organisms floating in the pools.

We have to work with what is to hand, and form our ideas on this basis. All known life on Earth uses proteins, made up of groups of twenty-five amino acids, to catalyse reactions efficiently; but this does not necessarily mean that early life used proteins. Other chemicals can catalyse the important reactions, although not so fast or so efficiently, so it is then obvious that proteins may be the successful and only survivors of a whole series of early systems tried out and discarded.

It is noteworthy that uncommon elements such as bromine, fluorine, iodine, vanadium, germanium, selenium, caesium, thallium and titanium are still utilised by existing species; perhaps they are the remnants of old metabolic paths.

Evolution can be considered to be the result of two independent processes, neither of which explains the mechanisms—evolution involving the random appearance of abilities in certain geographical areas and the combination of these abilities into a system which is able to survive and reproduce in a general environment.

The impulse to evolve is a strange thing, inextricably bound up with the phenomenon of life; it involves the potentiality to diverge into many forms, some of which must be more successful than their predecessors. This necessitates the ability to mutate randomly and then reproduce in the new form via a copying mechanism instead of a fixed, unalterable template or blueprint.

Then evolution becomes inevitable.

Life also needs a supply of raw materials for food and reproduction and this often involves the ability to influence the environment to obtain these materials.

In the distant days when something became life, Earth was about three thousand million years old and its temperature was little different from that of today. But there was no sweet oxygen to breathe. The atmosphere hung as a nauseating pall of water vapour, ammonia salts, carbon dioxide and monoxide, methane, sulphides and nitrogen vented by volcanoes early in Earth's history. Oxygen was noticeable by its absence, then being formed and existing only in the upper atmosphere

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where water vapour was split by hard radiation from the Sun and the hydrogen escaped into space because of its high temperature and kinetic energy.

The seas contained all the elements needed for life leached out of rocks.

And life appeared.

Into this primeval atmosphere slashed high energy radiation from interstellar space and, most important of all, ionising ultraviolet and solar radition. Perhaps in that distant time the atmosphere boiled into a turbulent, storm-ridden lightning-generating maelstrom.

We know now that electric discharge or short-wave ultraviolet light acting on a mixture of gases similar to that of Earth's then, results in a mixture of organic acids and amino acids which are the precursors of proteins. Even fairly long wave ultraviolet, in which the Sun's light is particularly rich, will have the same effect on gases absorbed on quartz or silicates.

Then light polymerised the amino acids into peptide—linked random complexes which needed only ordering to become proteins.

Somewhere on the floor of shallow lagoons life came into being on the surface of clays. It must have happened many times; some of the results were more successful than others—they grew and reproduced. They lived in a world deficient in oxygen; but they and their progeny converted water into oxygen. A tenth of Earth's surface water was split into oxygen and hydrogen, the hydrogen to escape into space and the oxygen to form our present atmosphere. It also laid down great beds of iron oxide by oxidation.

At the present rate of photosynthesis, it would take only 5,000 years to generate all our atmospheric oxygen.

The problem of the origin of life is not merely an academic exercise. Alfven recently has proposed a mechanism for the formation of the Solar System, using magneto-hydrodynamics and the effect of the Sun's magnetic field on the plasma cloud in which the Sun originated, which shows that almost every star must have a system of planets.

In addition to this, every dwarf GO star such as our own Sun will have planets similar in size and composition to our own Solar System. There will be a giant similar to Jupiter at the same distance out, there will be a twin mooned red planet

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similar to Mars, and the third planet from every such star will be a twin of Earth with its moon.

But, on all these postulated Earths, only if life has developed will there be blue skies and seas.

If, as more and more current scientific research seems to suggest, life is indeed a spontaneous phenomenon arising wherever local conditions are suitable, then every twin of Earth should have her own teeming life, which may very well be based on proteins. Just how far the parallels may extend we cannot say—as yet. Will the first interstellar explorers land on the third planet of a GO type sun only to find themselves back again in a mirror-distorting image of the world they have left?

As of now, we can say that stellar and micro evolution apparently go hand in hand.

To what end?

Kenneth Johns

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New York writer Richard Wilson produces a small but highly competent quota of short stories each year, and the occasional novel (his last published one, The Girls From Planet Five, is to be made into a film). Here is a new and hitherto unpublished short which could have the bitter ring of truth behind it.

THE BEST POSSIBLE WORLD

by RICHARD WILSON

It was almost time for the Programme. Floyd Geringer called his son.

" Vic—almost time."

" All right, Dad."

The boy was growing up. He'd been a motherless infant when they were cast away and now he was nearly fourteen. " Cast away " was Floyd's euphemism for the thing that had taken the two of them out into space, beyond hope of ever returning to Earth.

They sat in the worn, comfortable chairs in front of the speaker. The little finger of Floyd's left hand unconsciously sought out the tiny circle on the red felt-covered arm where the nap was gone. A cigarette burn had put it there. How many years had it been since he'd smoked a cigarette? Floyd wondered idly about it, then put it out of his mind. It didn't bother him any more.

Floyd Geringer looked at the clock. A minute to go.

Vic asked : " Why do we always listen at eight o'clock ?"

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" That's the best time," his father said. " It's night and people are home and it's after supper. They save the best shows for the biggest audience."

Naturally they kept their clock on Earth time, Floyd had once explained. New York time, specifically.

" But why can't we listen more than once a week ?" the boy asked.

He was small for his age, but then so was his father. And his mother had been tiny, too, before—Well, before it happened. Floyd didn't want to think about that, either.

" We have to conserve the batteries, son," he said. " They won't last for ever, you know."

" I guess not." Vic settled back in his chair and opened the book he had been holding, his place marked with his forefinger. It was *Robinson Crusoe*, his father noticed with a wry smile.

" Put the book down, Vic," he said gently. " It's time for Earth." He switched the set on when the red minute hand on the big clock marked thirty seconds before eight.

" It's a good book. It's about people like us, kind of. Did you ever read it, Dad ?"

" Yes, when I was a boy about your age. Quiet now."

Vic took a bookmark from his shirt pocket and placed it between the pages. He'd been careful to do that ever since the day his father had spoken sharply to him for turning down the corner of a page. He placed the book on the floor, noiselessly, leaned back and closed his eyes. " Too bad we don't have television," he said.

" I've explained about that," his father said. " It's—"

" I know, Dad. Shh—it's time."

As the second hand crossed the dot of 12 a voice from the speaker said :

" And now the International Broadcasting Company presents : The World Today ! Events and personalities who made the news this day. Brought to you by the makers of that household remedy that great-grandfather relied on, and which today still does the job that . . ."

Vic said : " We don't rely on it, do we, Dad ?"

"No, son. That's one of the things we can get along without. But we mustn't be too harsh on them. It does pay for the Programme."

" And then some," Vic said almost inaudibly.

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" And *now*," the announcer said : " The World Today ! First we're going to take you to Kansas City, where Sinclair Lewis, the Nobel Prize winning novelist, made news this day by daring God to strike him dead ! To Lane McGrath, in Kansas City :

" ' Hello. This is Lane McGrath in Kansas City, a city tonight variously indignant and thoughtful after the exhibition in a pulpit of that best-selling foe of Fundamentalism, Sinclair " Red " Lewis, who gave the Almighty ten minutes to show His Supreme Power by striking him dead. Mr. Lewis is still alive tonight and we have asked the man on the street for his views. Mr. Arthur Baldwin, grocery store owner, will you tell our audience what you think ? Right in the microphone here, Mr. Baldwin, that's right. " Well, I think maybe God in His Almighty compassion took pity on that man, and besides maybe He didn't want to waste one of His thunderbolts on such as that. I don't think it proves nothing." ' . . .

" News was also made today in Chicago. It was good news for the forces of law and order as agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, acting on a tip from a mysterious Woman in Red, gunned down Public Enemy Number One—the notorious John Dillinger. Dillinger, the man who had declared war on the United States, who had dyed his hair and erased his finger-prints and grown a moustache in his futile attempt to escape justice, got his as he emerged from a neighbourhood movie house called the Biograph. The G-Men gunned him down and the killer Dillinger died in an alley—once again the proof that Crime Does Not Pay ! . . ."

Floyd Geringer looked at his son. The boy's eyes were still closed. If he had been stirred by this great drama he gave no sign.

" . . . But sad news from England," the announcer was saying now, " where King George VI, fighting a losing medical battle, died. The grief of an Empire, however, is tempered by the knowledge that his lovely young daughter will now take the throne as Elizabeth II. The age-old tradition is repeated : The King is dead—long live the Queen ! . . .

" And from the world of sports, a thriller as the Brown Bomber and the Black Uhlan of the Rhine . . ."

Again the father watched the son as the magnificent tale was told of how Joe Louis made mincemeat of Max Schmeling in one round in their return bout. But Vic sat unmoving, head back and eyes closed, no emotion showing on his face.

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The Programme was ending. The announcer said :

" This has been The World Today. Good night now, and hope to see you right here again tomorrow."

Floyd, as he invariably did, reached for the knob as the announcer said " Good Night " and clicked it off on the last syllable of " tomorrow."

Vic opened his eyes. He had kept them shut throughout the entire broadcast and Floyd wondered if he slept through part of it.

" Earth had quite a day, didn't it ?" Floyd said.

" Mm," the boy said. " Dad, do we have anything by Sinclair Lewis ?" At least he'd heard the first item.

"I think we have *Main Street*, at least."

" He sounds like quite a guy," Vic said. " We're not very religious, either, are we, Dad ?"

" I guess not, Vic. But I hope you don't intend to go around daring the Deity. It would be just our luck to go too far. I'd sure hate to see our population here cut in half." Floyd's chuckle didn't sound entirely humorous.

" I won't, Dad." He picked up *Robinson Crusoe*. " Guess I'll go to bed and read a while. G'night."

" Good night, son." Vic had stopped kissing him good night when he was nine. Floyd had been saddened by that, among other signs that his son was growing up. Time did go on. One day he'd be dead and Vic would be alone. One day. But barring the unforeseen, it wouldn't be for many years.

He'd had a complete medical checkup only a few months before they'd been cast away and the doctor had told him he was in tip-top shape. There'd been that slight cough, of course. The doctor, a realistic man, had advised him to cut down on his smoking—stop it if he could. He'd done that when the cigarettes ran out—he'd had the last on Vic's fifth birthday, in a sort of celebration—and his cough vanished a month or so later.

Floyd, remembering the doctor, thought of other Earthly ties. The panic in Florida, and particularly in their town of Cocoa, where they had been staying on vacation, when the first bombs burst at nearby Cape Canaveral. Naturally the Cape and Vandenberg Air Force Base in California would be among the prime targets.

His wife had been out on the beach, waiting for a scheduled launching. She'd always been a rocket buff and finally it killed her.

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Floyd had been asleep in the motel, on his side of the double bed, with Vic on the cot. Vic, aged not-quite-two, had slept through the whole thing. Floyd picked him up and bundled the blanket around him and ran out into the night.

" They're all dead on the beach," somebody had yelled, and Floyd got into his car and went the other way, toward the missile test centre, thinking of the reinforced concrete bunkers which might provide protection for his son and himself against the attack.

No one was at the gate and he sped through, heading for the gantries silhouetted against the blazing bursts.

Project Magellan had saved them. *Magellan* was the two-man capsule whose launching his wife had been waiting to see. The two astronauts who had volunteered for the mission were rushed to fire control and the launch was scrubbed.

But everything had been ready. The enlisted men, lacking other orders, stayed at their posts. The orbital vehicle, fueled, stocked and primed for launch, stood there, slender and unmarked, its gantry swung away, ready.

Floyd, driving aimlessly through the pandemonium on the base, came to the site of *Project Magellan.* " Hey, you crazy civilian, take cover," a uniformed guard yelled, and Floyd stopped the car. The enlisted man—he had enough stripes to be at least a sergeant but Floyd hadn't kept up with the new Air Force ranks—helped him with little Vic into the concrete blockhouse.

It was while he was there, sipping a cup of instant coffee and feeding Vic a piece of chocolate one of the men had offered, that the radio gave the news.

" This is Washington," it said with the voice of defeat. " We're wiped out here. New York says the same. Chicago doesn't answer. San Francisco has surrendered. Ottawa is silent. Colorado Springs and Omaha got airborne but they're wiped out on the ground. Vandenberg has had it and Canaveral is barely operational."

" The hell we are," the sergeant said.

" Shut up, Sarge. Listen."

" In the absence of ability to wage further organized retaliation the instructions are as follows : Prepare to wage guerrilla warfare. Surrender only when outnumbered and threatened with annihilation. Destroy any military equipment which cannot be used effectively against the enemy and which

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may fall into his hands. Heaven help us all. By order of the surviving senior officer, Robert G. Hayden, Colonel, Signal Corps, Commanding . . ."

"Colonel !" the sergeant said. "Is that the best they've got left ?"

"Signal Corps !" a corporal said. "Things must be real bad."

The voice on the radio was reciting the pledge of allegiance. He must have been an old timer ; he left out the "under God."

"Jesus," the sergeant said. "Nobody ever told me to surrender before—not even in Korea."

"We got something to destroy here," the corporal said. "The rocket."

Somebody said "Yeah, how about that" and the sergeant, the surviving senior officer in that sector, roused himself.

"Okay," he said. "We got our orders. We fight guerrilla war. But first we got to take care of the civilians and keep the rocket out of the hands of the enemy. The way I see it, we can do both at the same time." He'd obviously been thinking it out. He turned to Floyd. "Mister, how would you and the baby like to take a little ride ?"

Floyd blinked unhappily. "Into space ? Into orbit ?"

"That's right. The way I see it, you're not equipped to be a guerrilla. You don't want to go, okay. We'll destroy the rocket. But then you got to take your chances by your lonesome. We can't help you. The other way is to go up. *Magellan's* all set. The capsule's supplied for thirty years for two. With the kid not eating much for a while, you ought to last a lot longer. What do you say ?"

Floyd Geringer thought as fast as he was able. To be at large in a world at war, with the responsibility of an infant, was no pleasing prospect. To be shot into space held no great attraction, either. But on balance he had to choose the latter. That decision, once made, would mean a minimum of decisions thereafter. In the other way lay only continued fear and privation.

"We'll go," Floyd told the sergeant. "We'll take *Magellan*."

"Okay," the sergeant said. "You heard him, men. The drill is the same—just like the flyboys were abroad. Mister, you'll find a manual of instructions inside the vehicle. There's no time to go over them with you now. Take the kid and follow me." To his men he said : "Prepare to launch."

The countdown began.

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In this way Floyd Geringer and his son, Victor, aged not-quite-two, were launched into orbit as *Project Magellan* while World War III raged on Earth.

There was quite a bit of room in Magellan. The designers of the satellite, knowing man's need for occasional privacy, had provided one bedroom for each occupant ; a functional room with cubicles for preparation of meals, sanitation and record keeping ; a recreation room with books, radio, tape recordings and player and comfortable chairs ; and an instrument room.

Floyd made the instrument room his den. Vic, excluded from it from the beginning, had his own room from the time he was four. Floyd fashioned toys for him from the plastic containers in which their almost inexhaustible supply of food was kept.

It had not been intended that *Magellan's* scheduled astronauts would be in space for thirty years but the planners had taken into consideration the possibility that, through some malfunction, they might be. Thus the huge store of food. There had been no adequately tested food synthesizer, but there was a water regenerator. Floyd had read the manual on it once, then put it away and tried to put the information out of his mind. It was a closed circuit system which permitted no drop of water ever to escape. Every bit of moisture was extracted from solid wastes, which were reduced to a fine powder and ejected from the satellite.

The air regenerator worked in a much more acceptable way and Floyd compensated for his other squeamishness by studying that manual until he knew it by heart. He told himself that if anything went wrong with the water, they'd have a day or so to put it right, whereas the air was something immediate and vital.

Another week ; another programme.

" It's time, Vic."

" Coming, Dad."

". . . The World Today ! Great news from Katmandu, in remote Nepal ! After years of striving for the pinnacle, Man has conquered Earth's highest peak. The news was carried—paradoxically in this modern age—first by a native runner, then by telephone and finally across the wires of the world press services : Two men completed the ascent of that forbidden height, Mount Everest, towering 29,002 feet toward the skies.

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One was Edmund Hillary, bee-keeper from New Zealand. The other a humble sherpa, or porter, Tenzing. Britain's flag was planted on the peak in honour of the newly-crowned queen. Already congratulatory messages have begun to flow in from around the world—from President Roosevelt, from President DeGaulle in Paris, from near and far this great achievement of exploration is being hailed . . .

" Almost at the same time the world learned of another great feat—the atomic submarine *Nautilus* completed the first underwater crossing under the ice of the North Pole. President Roosevelt, as Commander-in-Chief, made the announcement from the White House . . ."

This had opened Vic's eyes, Floyd noted with satisfaction. The son was looking at the father with a little smile on his lips.

" It's a great day for the explorers, isn't it, son ?"

Vic nodded. His smile vanished and he leaned back and closed his eyes until the end of the Programme. Floyd thought he detected a trace of tears under the closed lids, but he said nothing.

One sentimental night, when an orchestra on the Programme was playing a medley in which every third song seemed to be *Auld Lang Syne*, the announcer, speaking against a background of music, laughter and horn tooting, said : " And now, as the hour of midnight approaches, a special message. To you, Floyd Geringer, out there in space if you're within the sound of my voice, the happiest possible New Year to you. And to your son, Vic, who must be quite a little man by now. From all of us here on Earth, to you, Floyd and Vic, a happy New Year. Our thoughts are with you tonight, as always."

The music welled up, competing with the sound of happy people and the chiming of a clock.

This time it was Floyd's eyes that filled with tears. " Wasn't it nice of them to think of us, Vic ?"

Vic, who was dry-eyed, said : " Yes, Dad. Did you know that man ?"

" No, son. But he knows us, as all Earth does. Happy New Year, Vic, if it's possible to wish you such a thing."

" I'm happy, Dad. But can't they get up to us some way ? Don't they try ?"

The music stopped and in the sudden silence Floyd reached over and shut off the set.

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" Of course they do. Or they did, for a long time. It's just that it's awfully hard to try to locate a little speck of something in the immensity of space. I'm sure they're making plans right now for a new attempt, with better knowledge and equipment this time. Don't you ever give up hope, son."

" I'm okay," Vic said. " I feel like I'm Robinson Crusoe's son. Robinson Crusoe must have been awfully sad at times, like you, but his boy wouldn't be if he was just a baby and the island was really his home."

Floyd's eyes were still misty. He put his hand on Vic's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. " That's an intelligent way to look at it, son."

On another night, after a Programme in which Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile record, Man o' War won the Preakness and the Washington Senators crushed the New York Yankees 14 - 1, plunging them further into the cellar, Floyd Geringer discovered his son consulting a copy of the World Almanac.

Floyd had been in his den and thought the boy had gone to bed. He found him in the recreation room with the Almanac. He'd forgotten that it was aboard.

Vic looked up when his father came in and marked the place with a finger.

Floyd said conversationally : " Quite a book isn't it ?"

" Yes. Terrific. I guess it's got just about everything anyone would want to know."

" Statistically speaking, I suppose that's right," Floyd said. He hesitated, then said : " Mind telling me what you were looking up ?"

" Populations," Vic said promptly. He reopened the Almanac. His finger was marking the population density per square mile of Australia, which seemed to be the lowest in the world.

" I see," his father said. There was no reason for him to doubt his son's word. He ascribed the boy's curiosity to a morbid interest, since the biggest population he had ever really known was two. " I'd like to see the Almanac when you're finished with it, Vic. There's something I want to look up."

" Okay." Vic closed the book and handed it to him. " You can have it now. I'm finished. I think I'll go to bed."

" Good idea. Good night Vic."

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Floyd hurried to the den, clutching the Almanac. There was no need for him to consult it to know that Bannister and Man o' War had not been contemporaries, that Roosevelt had been dead when Everest was conquered, or that it had been in the Eisenhower administration that the *Nautilus* had transisted the Pole.

He hid the Almanac behind a pile of parts and sat down at the table in front of his tape splicing machine.

" You fraud," he said, more to himself than to it.

He swung in his chair to the player which had reeled off the latest Programme and ripped out the tape. For a moment he was heartily ashamed of himself for having practiced his involved deception on Vic. But then, as he looked around the tiny room and sensed the immensity and loneliness of space just beyond the hull of the capsule, he thought of his original reasons for the weekly Programme.

They were still valid, he decided ; he had not been doing any harm. He had been thrusting back the ever-crowding nothingness. He had been peopling their little world with great moments from that other dead one, against the finality which would one day overtake them.

He, the penultimate man, had been storing up memories which the last man—now still a boy—could take with him into the final orbit.

Books were one thing ; the honest, living words were another, truer history.

But Floyd had to admit that the words were not all honest. There were the genuine tapes he had discovered hidden in the instrument room years after they had been cast away. Apparently *Magellan's* planners had realistically considered that the worst might happen and that the astronauts might never come back—in which case their tomb would also be a time capsule for posterity. But there were also the tapes Floyd had faked, for continuity's sake, on the voder.

He caressed the compact, intricate keyboard of the voder—the voicewriter which transcribed written copy into speech, and which had organ-like stops and keys that regulated volume, timbre, inflections, chuckles and other authentic-sounding manifestations of humanity.

The voder, too, had been hidden away where the busy astronauts would not have been likely to find it in the brief orbitings that had been originally planned for them.

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Apparently it was another time capsule item—an artifact by which some future race could transcribe written records into perhaps more easily understandable speech.

No, Floyd thought, he had not deceived his son unduly. One day he would explain it all to him. Not yet, since Vic apparently was unsuspicious, despite his discovery of the Almanac, but later, when the father felt his time was running out and Vic would be alone. Until then it would be kindness—yes, and even a duty—to let Vic think that Earth still existed as a living world and that one day rescue would come.

Floyd Geringer, knowing that day never would come, thought back on what he had done. In his loneliness he had recreated the Earth he knew—or at least the Earth he remembered through the softening, blurring filter of nostalgia. It was an Earth-amalgam, put together with hindsight and careful editing. Floyd's manipulation of the tapes and the voder produced what for him was The Best Possible World: a world where FDR was president, where the New York Yankees still had Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and Murderer's Row, where Joe Louis was the heavyweight champ and Fred Allen was on the radio and Carole Lombard was still making movies and Albert Einstein was shuffling about in his study at Princeton, chalking great, prophetic equations on his blackboard. It was a world where no good person had died and in which time was bent to the whim of the rememberer. It was an Earth whose selective perfection often made its creator weep with ineffable grief at its loss.

Floyd supposed that in preparing the tapes in this way he had worked as much for his own nostalgic pleasure as to keep Vic from suspecting that they were the last two people alive. And why not? He need make no excuse to himself for having stressed the positive in the Programmes. Let Vic think the world had been good, as indeed it had, for the most part.

There was no immediate necessity for the boy to learn yet of the other aspects of his dead birthplace—the wars, the degradation of millions in poverty, the cruelty of some men to some other men, the terrible diseases. Enough of that was recorded in the set of history books which Floyd had long ago hidden from the boy's eyes.

Feeling better, Floyd fed a new tape into the voder and considered what next week's Programme would be about. Once he had thought he could prepare a Programme for each

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night, but reality of the job made him realize it would be an impossible task. As it was, he sometimes spent two full days putting the weekly tape together from his finite store of genuine spoken history and from his imagination. That was the reason he had lied to his son and said the batteries would not permit listening more often. The solar batteries, of course, would last beyond their lifetimes. But he would have to be careful from now on. No more shuffling events in time. More so than ever the history he recreated would have to be consistent with itself.

Unable for the moment to think what stirring events would thus logically fit into the next tape, he doodled on the voder. It relaxed him and sometimes it was inspiration.

This time he prepared a whimsical tape in which he treated the exploits of some appealing fictional characters with the sonorous seriousness that only such a true ham as a former radio announcer could impart. Floyd chuckled inwardly as his fingers danced over the keyboard and stops, sending Corey Ford's Walter E. Traprock and his unlikely crew to Tahiti on a raft made of ossified banana stalks, proving that the Pacific Ocean went that way from Eureka, California. Next he had the actor who did the Thinking Man cigarette commercials announcing from his deathbed that he was leaving his cancer-wracked body to Sloan-Kettering to be cut up as its researchers saw fit. Floyd concluded his little joke by having Bob and Ray's wonderful soap opera author, O. Lee O'Lahey, winning an Emmy for *Mary Backstage, Noble Wife*.

He played back the tape, immensely pleased with himself, then wiped it clean. Once he had considered leaving a collection of these whimsies to Vic, to be played after his own death to show the boy that the old man had had a sense of humour. But he'd decided against it. The references in them were too specialized for Vic. Only someone who had actually lived through Floyd's era could have appreciated them.

With a sigh for his memories, Floyd turned to the serious business of planning next week's Programme.

But when the next week came it was not Floyd who sought out his son at broadcast time. Vic Geringer opened the door to the recreation room at two minutes to eight and found it empty. He couldn't remember that this had ever happened before. Vic knocked on the door to his father's room.

" Dad ? It's time for the Programme."

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The voice that replied sounded old and tired. "I don't think I'll listen tonight. I just don't feel like it."

"Are you sick, Dad?" Vic called through the door. "Is anything the matter?"

Floyd opened the door but did not move toward his chair.

"I'm all right, Vic. Just a bit depressed. I think I'll go to bed early, if you don't mind."

"Of course not. But would it be all right if I listened?"

Floyd had hoped his son would not ask that question but he'd prepared for it. "Not at all. Go ahead. Why don't you switch it on for a change?"

"May I?" Vic had never had the privilege.

His father nodded and Vic watched the red second hand complete its sweep down to the 6. He turned the switch.

"I might as well listen, as long as I'm here," Floyd said. He settled himself wearily into the worn chair. Nervously his little finger sought out the cigarette burn on the left armrest.

At eight o'clock sharp the voice from the speaker said:

"The International Broadcasting Company, which usually presents The World Today at this time, has this announcement:

"Due to the fact that there were no newsworthy events today, we are omitting our regularly scheduled programme and substituting an hour of symphonic music."

Vic looked at his father in surprise. Floyd shrugged.

"I guess nothing happened," the father said. "I remember that there were days like that in the news business, though of course no one ever admitted it."

"*Something* must have happened somewhere," Vic said.

What had happened, as never before, was that Floyd had not made a news tape. When he'd got down to the actual work of trying to prepare it he'd become so nervous at the recollection of the Almanac scare Vic had given him that it just wouldn't go. In the past he'd been able to select almost at random from the genuine tapes and to type on the voder virtually anything he chose. But this time the necessity to be consistent and avoid arousing Vic's suspicions had caused a mental block. Finally, with the Programme only hours away, Floyd realized it would be impossible for him to do it that week.

He felt fairly confident that Vic would not ask to hear the Programme on his own initiative but, as a precaution, he prepared the symphonic tape. Now he thanked his lucky stars

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(use of that ridiculous cliche made him laugh ironically to himself) that he had.

The voice from the speaker said : " We bring you at this time Anton Bruckner's 7th Symphony in E, as conducted by Van Beinum with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw."

As the majestic music began, Floyd leaned forward to switch it off.

" Leave it, Dad, please," Vic said, then added after what Floyd thought might have been a significant pause : "—if it won't waste the batteries."

" All right," Floyd said. " But I think we have that in our record library." He knew perfectly well they had ; this was a transcription of it. And now he was doubly thankful, though not to the stars this time, that he had transcribed the entire symphony.

" Yes, but this is from Earth," Vic said, " even if it is only a recording. It makes a difference. "

The next day Floyd Geringer got drunk. Only twice before had he touched the brandy that had been stored in *Magellan's* emergency kit. The first time had been that terrible day, a few months after they'd been cast away, when he'd picked up Earth's farewell message on the radio. The other time had been on his fiftieth birthday, that chronological landmark which had reinforced his knowledge that his life and man's was drawing to a close.

He locked himself in his den with the bottle of Hennessy, thinking again of that last message from Earth. It had been recorded by some thoughtful casualty of the final, suicidal war. Floyd blessed the anonymous man who had had the selflessness in his dying hours to prepare Earth's obituary and beam it into space where, as he had said, some unknown ear might receive it. Thus the hearer would know what had killed Earth and might heed the lesson for his own planet. The hearer might also, if there were still time, rescue the only two survivors of the disastrous conflict : the man and boy who had been hurled into orbit in the space capsule *Magellan*.

Sometimes, but not often, Floyd cursed the man who had prepared the message. He must have known that the possibility of any wandering spaceship approaching Earth in that particular tiny span of time was negligible, but that the castaways in *Magellan* would almost certainly hear the message if they still lived. It had been cruel of that dying Earthman to

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tell them they were doomed ; to rob them of the hope that even silence would have given them. But then Floyd would call back his curse and reflect that he probably would have done the same thing, if had been given the chance.

As the level of the brandy bottle went down, Floyd got out the tape he had made of the message. He had not recorded it at first, both hating and loving this last link with Earth, to which he had tuned in daily with morbid fascination. But one day it seemed weaker, as if the batteries were dying or the generator—Floyd imagined the turbulence of a river perhaps powering the transmitter—affected by some non-human cataclysm. He quickly made a tape. Within a week there was only silence from Earth.

Floyd now played the message once more, though he knew the words by heart. He had another drink, toasting the unknown obit writer, then purposefully corked the bottle and began to prepare the Programme for next week. It would be the last one.

It was eight o'clock.

" Okay, son ?"

" Ready for Earth, Dad."

Floyd turned the switch. As the red hand crossed 12, the voice began :

" This is your father speaking to you, Vic."

The boy had been in his usual position, head back and eyes closed. His eyes snapped open and looked from his father in the worn old chair to the speaker from which his father's voice was coming. Floyd put a finger to his lips and motioned to the boy to listen. Vic nodded and leaned back again, but intent on every word.

" I think it will be easier for me to talk to you this way, son," Floyd's voice was saying. " It gives me a chance to think things out before I say them, and then to change them if I haven't said them right. I happen to be very good at editing a tape . . ."

As the voice continued, Vic closed his eyes. But Floyd knew he was listening carefully. After a while tears trickled from under the closed lids.

". . . You see, there was so much of Earth for you to know, and so much that I loved, that I wanted its memory to mean something to you. I wanted you to know the living Earth, as I

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had, or as nearly as I could make you appreciate it. I didn't want you to study Earth as you would a dead language . . .

" I admit I misled you and I apologize for that. But I don't ask to be forgiven for having edited history a bit. You'll find the facts in the World Almanac, which you may have back, and in other books I've hidden from you until you were older. But the facts are not enough. Earth was more than a set of statistics. Earth was my home—and yours for a little while—and I think what I've tried to teach you about it in my own crazy way is truer than anything you are ever likely to read. The books are necessarily full of assassinations and pestilence and wars ; those were our history's turning points. But I gave you Earth's noble moments and some of its comedy. There isn't enough of that in the books."

The voice stopped.

Floyd turned off the set. " The tape's in two parts," he said. "I think that's enough for now."

Vic got up and sat tentatively on the arm of his father's chair. Then, as Floyd touched him gently, the boy threw himself into his father's arms, hugging him and sobbing. Floyd was crying, too. It had been too long since his son had sat in his lap. And this was not only his son. This person from whom he'd been withholding his love was the only other human being.

After a while Vic sat up and blew his nose but stayed in his father's lap. " It's all right, Dad."

" Of course it is," Floyd said. He used his own handkerchief. " But are you comforting me or forgiving me ?"

Vic laughed. " Whichever you want. I guess you've been awfully worried about me, being alone so much. But that's the way life is, isn't it ? I mean now, not the way it used to be. I'm all right, Dad. Honest. I guess I don't miss anything, the way you do, because I never knew anything else. But I sure feel sorry for you sometimes."

" You feel sorry for me ?" his father said, surprised.

" Sure I do. It must be tough on you, cooped up here with nobody but a kid."

" Don't talk nonsense. And you mean that—about not feeling sad about Earth—not missing it ?"

" I told you once, Dad. I'm Robinson Crusoe's son. I never knew any better. But I do worry about you, sometimes, going off by yourself and fooling around with those tapes so much."

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Floyd hid his guilty look in his son's neck. " Tell me, Vic, honestly, now, when did you first suspect they were fakes ?"

The boy didn't answer immediately. Finally he said : " The time before you caught me with the Almanac. I wasn't really looking up populations. I was looking up presidents. Franklin D. Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, didn't he ?"

" Yes."

" But I'll bet he was a great guy, wasn't he ?"

" I think so," Floyd said. " So did a lot of people."

After a while the boy said : " Hey—now that you don't have to be a radio announcer any more maybe we can spend more time together."

" I guess I have been neglecting you, haven't I ?"

" I hardly ever saw you."

" We'll fix that, all right. Now that you're almost fourteen, maybe you're old enough to play a little game called poker."

" I know how already. Don't forget, I had plenty of time to read—the Almanac, Hoyle, practically everything."

" Maybe you are pretty grown up, at that. Think you're strong enough to listen to Earth's farewell message ? Then you'll know everything I've learned in the last dozen years."

" Sure, if it won't bother you too much to hear it." Vic went back to his own chair but he sat upright in it, his eyes wide open and shining with something Floyd hadn't seen in them in years. Floyd suspected it was something more than filial love ; he suspected it was friendship—a good strong bond between two men. He felt himself getting sniffily again and quickly turned on the set.

" It's on the second part of the tape," Floyd said. " And I can stand it if you can."

" Go ahead, Dad."

Vic was silent for a time after he'd heard it, as if he were respecting the poignant memories it evoked in his father. Then he said :

" I appreciate your playing it for me, Dad. I know what it must do to you. When did you last hear it direct ?"

" It faded out a long time ago, Vic."

" Maybe it's back again. Batteries recharging themselves, or some way. I'd like to hear it live, if it's still there."

" It's not, but let's give it a whirl. Come on down to the den."

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Floyd showed him how the radio worked. " This was about where I heard it. See ? There's nothing now. Just static. You and me and static, son ; that's all that's left."

" You're getting sentimental again, Dad. What happens if you turn this ?" Vic turned it.

" More static," Floyd said. " It just—"

" What was that ?"

Vic turned the knob back toward the spot he'd just passed. Faint and distorted as it was, they both heard it. Floyd increased the volume. It was code, not voice.

" Some automatic transmitter, probably," Floyd said. " Funny I never picked it up before." But his face was shining with hope. He picked up a pencil and began to write down the letters, concentrating hard both because the signal was so weak and because his code was rusty.

". . . LLING MAGELLAN MOON CALLING MAGELLAN GETTING ORGANIZED HERE. DON'T GIVE UP HOPE. WE WILL REACH YOU IN TIME. YOUR SIGNAL CLEAR."

" The Moon !" Floyd said. " They must have got off another rocket."

" Our signal ?" Vic said. " I didn't know we had one."

" Automatic beep, I suppose. Shh."

The Moon's message continued ; " MOON CALLING MAGELLAN. THIS IS A MECHANICAL SIGNAL. NO RESPONSE TO OUR EARLIER MESSAGES EXCEPT YOUR AUTOMATIC. LETS HEAR FROM YOU LIVE AND WILL SWITCH TO VOICE. WE MONITOR YOU DAILY. MESSAGE ENDS.

" MESSAGE BEGINS. MOON CALLING MAGELLAN. MOON CALLING . . ."

" So there is somebody else." Vic yelled, pounding his father on the back. " They must have left at the same time we did."

" Or else there was a secret Moon base all the time. Don't hit me so hard, boy ; I'm an old man."

" No, you're not. I wonder where they came from ?"

" Canaveral, Vandenberg or Wallops Island. Those were the only three launching sites."

" Don't forget Russia. Maybe those are Russians up on the Moon."

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" Don't be unpatriotic, son."

" I'm not, Dad." Vic looked thoughtful. " But I figure I'm a human being first, and after that a Magellanite Earthman. I'm American by descent, of course."

" Well, whatever you are, we'd better get our own message going. Looks as if I'll have to make at least one more tape, after all. How about lending me a hand ?"

" Okay, Dad . . . Say, how long do you think it'll take them to get to us ?"

" ' In time,' they said. It could mean years. They can't have anything like Earth's facilities up there."

" I don't mind," Vic said. " It'll give us a chance to get to know each other."

Richard Wilson

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Hurwitz, Justin and Rayburn—an Aristo and two ex-Pool arabs—now form an invincible trio as they carve a financial empire out of the wealth of their rivals. Despite their individual talents, however, there is one factor none of them can offset—emotion.

THE FATAL FIRE

by KENNETH BULMER

Conclusion

foreword

Towards the end of the 21st Century, three classes comprise Earth's teeming millions : the Aristos, the ruling class in a minority but gifted with extraordinary faculties ; the Construction Crews, educated and skilled workmen ; and the vast mass of workless made redundant by technological advances, who live out their brief lives in the Pools centred in every city. Opportunities exist for the more intelligent Pool youngster to graduate out of his environment and this happens to JULIAN JUSTIN, an orphan, who is conscripted into a Construction Crew team bound for Erinore, a newly developed planet in the Galaxy.

Justin has a peculiar mental " colour sense " which warns him him of danger and while on Erinore he puts this to use when he teams up with ED RAYBURN, a young gambler. Together they obtain a sizeable fortune and then desert the CC by stealing a flyer and making for the main city's spaceport. Hiding on board a small spaceship owned by HURWITZ an Aristo they take

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command when the ship is out in space only to find that enemies of Hurwitz have sabotaged part of the mechanism. The ship crashes on a barren part of Erinore and the three begin the long trek back to civilisation—with a plan to become the most powerful financial group in existence.

The most powerful corporation in the Empire is that of the SKARDON family, run by Old Eli who refuses to make way for his sons Harold and Louis. Young Eli, son of Louis, plans drastic action to obtain control of the family's business including marrying his cousin, Estelle, Harold's daughter. Apart from financial battles the family are subject to personal combat by hired Assassins of opposing Combines and the family are constantly at war both within themselves and against outsiders.

When Old Eli dies the family confer on the pleasure world of Mytilene and call a business conference of most of the leading Combines. Estelle is left to her own devices and while bowl-flying catches a glimpse of Paul Hurwitz whom her father had once wanted her to marry. In avoiding him she suddenly meets a stranger who arouses strange and conflicting emotions within her.

thirteen

An obliging robot popped a lighted cigar between his lips and he drew fragrant smoke luxuriously.

" This," said Ed Rayburn expansively, " is the life."

He inspected his meticulously polished plastileather shoes propped on the desk before him and ran an admiring and sensuous finger along the synthivelvet of his jacket lapels, swivelling about in his deeply upholstered chair as he did so. Ed, evidently, was not only in the chips but was enjoying life to the full. He gave a deep, satisfying sigh, and signalled the robot for a long, cool, spicy drink.

" And when you've finished the peacock act, Ed," Justin said unkindly from across the desk, " you can listen to what Paul has to tell us of this place. We're on to a big killing this time."

Paul Hurwitz, as suave and as dapper as though he had never had to crawl on hands and knees across an alien sea of grass and to drink the blood of a freshly-slaughtered bird to stay alive, smiled benignly around on his two friends and accomplices.

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" Mytilene," he told them, his pleasant tenor voice not the least disturbed by what he was saying, " is a pleasure world. Or, rather, I should say worlds. You can fly from any planet to any other in atmosphere. The whole ball, which is considerably larger than Jupiter, I might say, is held together by electro-magnetic forces created and maintained by the machines and the robot brains on the centre planet, which spins of itself but does not move within the gaseous envelope. That is the original and very ancient planet."

Justin and Ed sensibly remained quiet when Hurwitz talked. So far, they had cleaned up nicely in various small and test operations, and the plans they had discussed on the ocean of grass on Erinore were bearing fruit—ripe, rich fruit, and there was plenty more for the plucking. As Hurwitz had told them, there had been little difficulty in leaving the planet once they had walked into the town, and the mere fact that an Aristo vouched for them, calling them his colleagues, had obtained for them first class spaceship accommodation. Yes, they would listen when Hurwitz talked. Justin himself had spent every spare moment perfecting two accomplishments—the art of reading and writing, and the art of speaking with that clipped and yet drawling accent that was so infuriatingly Aristo, and so hard of imitation.

Now Hurwitz went on : " Skardon is on planet."

" This Skardon," said Ed. " He must be a big wheel from the way you talk of him, Paul."

" He is. Already you are beginning to realise, Ed, that in the big business world of the Aristos and the Companies, your get-rich-quick schemes are, to put it crudely, childish. Even the least ingenuous of us can match and beat you at any financial game you care to attempt. You've found that out."

" Yes," Ed said, shortly for him. " I've found out that I need to learn a lot more than I already know before any schemes can go into action properly and I can begin to clean up in the way I plan—"

" Oh, stow it, Ed !" Justin, for some strange reason, felt on edge. The quiet confidence and unruffled calm of the Aristo irritated him and the brash babbling idiocy of Ed grated on his nerves. " Go on, Paul, about Skardon. I take it he is our next target ?"

" Right. His father recently died and he came into his inheritance along with his brother Louis. As soon as we were

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back in civilisation from Erinore, he contacted me. This was when you two were polishing yourselves up for polite society. He wanted to put pressure on his father through me ; but I turned him down." Hurwitz smiled reflectively. " It was an effort for me to refuse him for personal reasons ; but we have bigger game in our sights. I intend—that is—we intend to squash him flatter than an airless bathyscaphe under a thousand gravities. Smash, quick, clean, bloodless."

" Bloodless ?" asked Ed. He would have gone on speaking but both Justin and Hurwitz had cottoned on to the trick of taking Ed up on his automatic repeat of the key word of the previous remark. Now Hurwitz went on speaking smoothly.

" Bloodless in that there will be no assassin assistance required. Preparations are already afoot and my office manager T'Sung is just waiting for the word from me."

" How do we come in ?" asked Justin. He wanted to get away and go flying in a bowl among the artificial clouds ; but he could not break the triumvirate confidence between them.

" Are your colours still giving you a clear view ahead ?"

" Yes. No danger."

Ed laughed and patted the holstered gun. He slept with it. " This ensures that your colours don't let us down, Julian. If Paul goes under, you follow—quick."

" Well, don't lick your lips, then."

Ed laughed, and patted the gun again.

As the conference broke up after little further discussion, Hurwitz said : " As soon as we've broken Gorgon Industries we can move on to even bigger fish ; people like the Carons, for instance."

" Gorgon Industries ?" said Justin. He thought. Dim and cobwebbed memories flitted in his brain. He thought of the Pool—a memory that had not touched him for years—and he thought of his foster father, Talbot, of the last days he had spent in the ricketty tenement apartment, and of Honest John Flayer. He remembered the translucent beauty of his sister, Bella Rose—and he remembered Gorgon Industries.

" Yes," he said grimly. " Gorgon Industries will do very well as a target for us. I'm going to enjoy smashing them flat, and taking the loot from the wreckage."

Hurwitz looked at him shrewdly ; but, in true Aristo fashion, he did not comment on the intensity of hate in Justin's voice and face. He merely stood up, smiled and bid them good day.

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He had work to do, camouflaging his activity in attendances at the big business conference ; and Ed and Justin were free to amuse themselves on the many pleasure worlds of Mytilene. But, for all that, there was a thoughtful little pucker between his eyebrows as he left them.

Justin said : " I want to go flying in a bowl, Ed. Coming ?"

Ed swung his elegantly shod feet from the desk, stood up and stretched. He blew fragrant cigar smoke. " Not today, thanks, Julian. I have, shall we say, other commitments."

" As you wish," replied Justin absently, thinking that Ed probably had an assignation with a woman. " I'll probably be back half-way through Azure."

Ed chuckled. " You won't see me until Coral. If then. I have much work to do, my fine feathered friend, much work indeed." He twirled around the office, bumping into robots and filing cabinets, laughing to himself. Justin stared at him.

" Are you still rational, Ed ?" he asked sympathetically. " Or shall I take your gun and put you out of your misery ?"

" Ha," Ed said, halting by the door. " Very funny. Just remember, the gun is to be used *on* you, not *by* you." He flung his short cloak with the Hurwitz badge elegantly about him. " Cheerio, Julian. Be good."

It was all in fun, of course. But Justin had the uneasy feeling that the possession of the gun and the dreadful knowledge of what he must do with it should Hurwitz be assassinated had affected Ed's brain. There was a chill feeling in Justin as he found his own personal flier and took off for the planetoid containing the flying bowl he liked best. His circumstances had changed drastically from the days when he had been a Pool arab stealing chickens and playing dangerous games under the monorails with Raphe Bartram. He thought with a sudden nostalgic pang of his old friend, and wondered what the world had done to him in these years.

He parked the flier and changed in the dressing rooms into a ridiculous silver-spangled pair of bathing trunks and dived off into the flying bowl. His anti-grav pack was not adjusted correctly to his weight and he parked himself on an artificial cloud to adjust it. Then he plunged out and down.

A girl in a single-piece bathing costume was flying up towards him. He had no time to give way to her for with a sudden feeling of panic he realised that his colours were pulsating—dimly—in his brain. His preoccupation with

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thoughts outside of himself had deadened his perceptions ; his colours burned up brightly as he realised that they had sprung to life. There was danger, abruptly, shockingly, near.

And then, for the first time in his life, Julian Justin saw in his inner mind colours of a hue and a scent that he had never before experienced. He studied them, amazed, incredulous.

There was no mistake. He was being warned in an unmistakable way that there was mortal peril at hand—but he knew, for the very first time, that the peril was not for him.

His colour perception of approaching danger was telling him that this girl, flying gaily upwards, was the person in peril—and he didn't even know her !

fourteen

Julian Justin said to the strange girl as colours screamed a warning in his mind : " Are you all right ?"

She did not reply. There was no need to make an answer to what had, suddenly and shockingly, become a silly question.

She dropped. She plummetted straight down, her arms flailing above her head, her legs slimly extended as she struggled automatically in the terror of the moment. Justin flung his anti-grav pack over to full negative and went pitching downwards, travelling faster than the one-g acceleration pulling the girl down in the flying bowl. Clouds spun past. A flight of birds, their feathers shining, swirled away and past. People were looking and pointing. Everything happened with the ghostly silence and mime of a television set with the sound switched off.

The thought flitted through the back of Justin's mind that any comparable disaster in the Pool would have been accompanied by frenzied screaming from ever woman in sight.

A shadow in the corner of his eye turned into a burly man with the hard good looks that Justin was beginning to recognise as the mark of one not quite an Aristo. Justin determined that he would not allow this newcomer to steal the glory of saving this strange girl. He forced every descending foot per second speed he could from his anti-grav pack, swirled past the slender body of the girl and then reversed his dials to neutral. He took the girl in his arms.

She was warm and vibrant and trembling; but quite unafraid.

" Hold on," he said gruffly. " We're going up."

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He carefully pushed the dial over until the anti-grav pack was bearing them both up safely and the rush of wind in their ears had diminished. They soared upwards. The girl began to laugh ; clearly, sweetly, her full throat working in jumping swallows. Justin looked at her askance. Then he relaxed. This was not hysterics ; rather it was the nervous laugh of one who has successfully pulled off a dangerous gamble ; of one who has staked a fortune on one throw of the dice and seen all the dots turn black.

Justin began to understand.

As the man swung in towards them, Justin, from his anger said : " It was fun while it lasted. But it's really not my idea of fun and games. Be seeing you."

And he released the girl and let her drop.

She swirled away below. The triangle of her face looked up. The mouth was very red, and was pouting in a way that, for all his annoyance, made Justin laugh in amused tolerance of a vain and silly girl's pranks.

The man said angrily : " What did you let her go for ?"

He thumbed his own dial over again and shot off down.

Justin guessed he was the Aristo girl's bodyguard.

He shouted : " Earn your salary, friend. "

Other people about had turned away on their own business and were lazing on clouds or sipping drinks dispensed by flying robo servants, and Justin signalled one over and took a cool drink in a crystal goblet shaped like a spaceship. He watched with an interest he could not conceal as the bodyguard slowed up far below in the bowl. The girl was rising of her own accord, shooting up as though her anti-grav had not, the moment before, broken down and let her fall to certain death.

Justin laughed cynically, and drank. He tossed the goblet to a robo servant and took off, heading for the exit.

Trying to explain the crazy whims and antics of these pampered Aristos was a job for someone with an intricate and feckless a mind as theirs. In the time that Justin had so far spent in the outer world—the various planets and satellites, including the Earth, that existed with the Pools as merely small areas of corruption on their surfaces—had convinced him that the vast majority of people were no different from those who lived in the Pools. The Aristos were different. Frighteningly so. They seemed possessed of some spirit, some feeling of

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perfect self-righteousness, that was infallible and which transferred them onto another plane of human existence.

The first time Justin had seen Paul Hurwitz at work had taken his breath away. The Aristo had sat indolently surrounded by tv screens, radios, telephones, teleprinters, secretaries and robo servants. Without in any way disturbing his poise or his concentration on the individual item immediately engaging his attention, he had dealt quietly with many channels of information, had given orders on many levels, had dredged from his memory facts and figures from years gone by and integrated them in his present calculations. And, to cap it all, he looked up, greeted Justin and Ed with a smile, and between other instrustions, had carried on an enlightening conversation with them. It had shaken Justin.

Thinking about that now as he made his way towards the exit made him curse and, at the same time resign himself to the knowledge that, as yet, he was no Aristo. As soon as the girl had begun to fall he should have known that she was in no real danger because of what he had observed among the Aristos he had met in company with Hurwitz. The other people around in the flying-bowl had shown no surprise or agitation when the girl had fallen and he had remarked to himself on that fact.

Of course they hadn't. They'd known the girl was only skylarking.

The thing he had observed among the Aristos and which he should have remembered had been epitomised one day as he and Ed Hurwitz had been walking toward Hurwitz' block of offices. The three had been walking abreast. Suddenly, with a lithe spring, Hurwitz had leaped against the wall of the nearby building. Startled, Justin and Ed had turned to stare at him. Even as Justin's colours began to flame, Hurwitz had shouted : " Jump for it !" and they had leaped to join him.

The gyrating ground car, out of control, went past with two wheels on the kerb. A second later and they would have been smeared beneath the heavy tyres and chrome trimmed bumpers.

Aristos could walk across a street crowded with traffic as though they had a charted lane for them alone. Amidst growling cars they threaded a danger-free lane. When Justin and Ed had coughed at foul carbon monoxide fumes spurting from exhausts in defiance of the laws, Hurwitz had breathed as though taking in pine-scented air from some mountain upland.

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He could sit in a small room and smoke cigars until the air was blue and everyone's eyes—except an Aristos—streamed and their lungs burned.

Learn to be an Aristo ! Justin laughed sourly and pushed himself onto the landing platform, began to walk to his dressing cubicle.

A soft hand closed around his biceps.

He turned resignedly to face the girl.

An exceedingly hard and horny hand came round in a blurred arc and cracked across his mouth and jaw. He rocked back. Then he began to smile, the back of his hand to his mouth.

" Thank you, miss," he said politely. " I should have expected that from you."

" Ill-mannered beast," she said evenly. Her breast rose and fell in a way that told Justin that—very surprisingly—she was agitated. Aristos never became agitated, did they ?

"Ill-mannered yes," he said. "But not, I hope, destructively mischievous."

" I don't know what you mean."

Justin began to walk along to his cubical. The sight of this girl upset him—no, rather, profoundly disturbed him, and disturbed him in a way that no other girl, not even the dead and flayed Bella Rose, had ever been able to do. He recalled his colours flaming so brightly for the danger threatening this girl, and he took cynical delight at prodding the finger of scorn at himself as he looked at the spectacle of himself becoming alarmed at the girl's self-originated threat. It was, when you looked at it like that, very funny.

She walked impudently at his shoulder. Her head reached to his ear. A nice height . . .

" I can see you're no Aristo," she said.

Infuriated, in some vague fashion humiliated, Justin walked on in silence.

" You don't talk like an Aristo." She was taunting him now. " And you proved at once, anyway, without anything else, you weren't, as soon as you dived after me—"

" Your anti-grav unit might have failed," Justin was tormented into saying.

She laughed scornfully. " Act your age. They never fail."

" They might," he said stubbornly.

" My name is Estelle Freeman," she said as they reached the cubicle door. " What's yours ?"

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" Does it matter ?"

Her cheeks flamed. Standing like that, one hand on the door handle which responded to his finger-index and opened of itself, Justin acknowledged that this girl had a certain something that no other girl he had ever known had ever been anywhere near possessing. He felt drawn to her.

It was a most odd and upsetting experience. He turned to go in, and paused. Even before she spoke he knew he couldn't leave it like that.

" I'm sorry if—if I've distressed you." She sounded breathless. " It's just that, well, I cannot explain now . . ."

He turned to face her and her chin went up. She went on : " Anyway, I don't have to explain to you ! I do what I like—I'm free, twenty-one—well, nearly—and an Aristo."

Justin laughed. He couldn't help it. She looked an enchanting mixture of elfin innocence and youth and a bedevelling amalgam of age-old allure and mischief.

" I'm Julian Justin," he said, " And I'll see you in the bar as soon as we're changed."

She started to say something in immediate response to his domineering tone ; but bit off, and said meekly ; " Very well, Julian. In fifteen minutes."

Ten minutes later Justin, freshly shaved, laundered and shone, walked through from the elevator towards the bar. He was crossing the softly-carpeted hall wondering what he was heading into, when the hard-faced character who had been chaperoning Estelle Freeman walked swiftly towards him.

" Just a minute, bub."

" Yes ?"

" Keep away, bub. Get it ? Hands off."

The man's use of the word ' bub ' brought, agonisingly, a memory of Raphe Bartram. Moved by that, and by his Pool background, Justin said : " Scram, flunkey. Buzz off. Mind your own business."

The man's face went mean and his eyes screwed down in folds of flesh. His mouth tightened up. He reached out a big broad hand towards Justin's immaculate lapels.

All the face contortions slowed him down.

Justin struck him once on the jaw, caught him under the shoulders as he went down and dragged him off to one side and dumped him into a video booth. Hand on the door, Justin paused, and a delighted smile spread across his face. He dived a hand into his pocket, took out a shiny demi-soldar and

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inserted it into the slot. " Run a girlie-tape," he told the robot and as the first solidos of the chorus-line pranced onto the little screen, he went out, slammed the door and said over his shoulder : " Enjoy the show, *bub*."

He walked through into the bar. Bottles, glasses, coloured lights, flowers, music, all faded to a meaningless background jumble as Estelle Freeman walked towards him over the deep pile carpet. Justin let out a low breath of pure admiration. She held out her hand, smiling, and lights glinted on the magnedust in her hair.

He took her hand in his, and for all his Pool-bred cynicism, he could have sworn that a high-amperage electric current passed from her to him—and was returned many stages boosted.

" Shall we—" he began, and then stopped. He paused. " Let's take a flier trip around the planets," he said then. " Sample the twelve suns. After that, a little dinner in a restaurant that I happen to know serves the best Terran steaks and the finest Venusian sea food this side of the Galactic hub."

" And after that ?" Her nose wrinkled up in laughter lines that curved her mouth so that Justin felt a sharp and poignant pain in the small of his back.

" After that," he said firmly, leading her outside to his parked flier, " who knows ?"

fifteen

" Well, where *is* she, then ?"

Harold Vladimir Skardon glared at the Shield Bearer operative. He had not, he considered, been as angry or as apprehensive as he now was since the time he'd fallen out of his cot when the robot servant blew a fuse.

" I'm sorry, sir ; but, well, the guy had a hefty punch—"

" I want no excuses." Skardon looked at the blue and yellowish bruising along the operative's jaw, clearly discernible in the small screen on his personal flier. He was on the way to a most secret and important conference with the Carons and the Murats and the Farnhams. Aristo though he was, he had, at this juncture, no desire to have a part of his attention diverted by personal and family matters.

These four huge companies were discussing, in secret and at the highest level, the possibility of joint action against the new and mysterious power that had lately begun to infest the

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business system. Infest was the word wisely chosen by them to described the new situation. And, like an infestation of vermin, the new attacks would be countered and their originators destroyed. That, at least, was certain.

"Find where she is and bring her in," he said. "Use whatever force is necessary. You know my standing. Your accounts will be met, on the nail. Understood?"

"Understood, sir."

The Shield Bearer man had the sense not to say any more. He cut the connection. Skardon shut out the possible plight of Estelle from his mind and began to run over again his plans. If George Wotan Caron didn't play the big tycoon, lording it over all the rest, then perhaps they might work together. Otherwise—otherwise was not a suggestion that, on balance, he cared to dwell on.

He chuckled with solid amusement as he figured in the strange and unprecedented step he had taken. He had not informed his brother Louis of these proposed plans.

On balance, that was a good idea.

They painted the worlds red that night. From one planetoid to another, dancing in the enormous ball of air, they flitted in Justin's flier, sipping at the delights of each specialist entertainment, going on from one pleasure to another, sampling the distilled essences of all the gaiety and joyousness of the Galaxy, concentrated in the airy sphere and its tiny spinning worldlets. Laughing, heads thrown back, flushed, decorated with singing blooms and floral leis that perfumed them in the scents of a hundred hot-house paradise worlds, they were like a young god and goddess descended for a heady night to taste of mortal enjoyment.

They went through the colour periods without feeling tiredness, upheld not by drugs but by their own heady brand of enthusiasm and eagerness for laughter and fresh delights.

When at last, still with the bloom of their new found happiness fresh upon them, they parked on the roof top landing strip of Estelle's hotel, they were already planning new and even more wondrous exploits.

Mytilene could not be exhausted in a mere single revolution of the circling suns.

Justin wended his way back to his hotel in a wondering daze. He showered, put on newly-laundered nylon pajamas and flopped out on his magnebed. He was asleep in so deep a slumber that the preset alarm had to reach over and be less

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than gentle to waken him. He sat up, yawning and stretching and with the father and mother of all foolish smiles plastered across his face.

Ed said : " You look disgusting." It was the time of the long knives for Ed, and he didn't intend to miss a jab.

As he prepared for the day's work—there was a conference scheduled with Hurwitz and a small Company that the triumvirate intended to take over in a friendly way if they could. If not, well, there were other means. As he prepared, then, Justin could think only of Estelle.

Ed chivved him unmercifully, until Justin turned on him.

" I haven't enquired where you were last night," he said meaningly.

" And well you should." Ed's face was animated. " I've been casing the joint, as the brotherhood says in the Pool. I've a pretty little deal lined up. I won't bother you with the details. All I want is for you to come along with me, meet this character, and then, if I tell you I'm going to stick my trusty needle into you, let me know what your colours say. Jake ?"

In other circumstances Justin would probably have cried off the whole deal. He was forming an exaggerated impression of Aristo business methods. But now he was anxious only to placate Ed to secure peace and time to himself—and Estelle. So he accompanied Ed to the meeting, met the contact, a slick, smooth, oily character called Kenton, and waited for his colours. The thought of Ed's needle was kept firmly in his mind. His colours told him nothing was amiss and he passed the good news onto Ed.

Ed chuckled, his lean face animated, and concluded the deal. Then they went to meet Hurwitz.

At this second conference of the morning the affair was conducted in a very different atmosphere. There was a large and imposing boardroom, and six worried directors, and the passionless ferocity of Hurwitz taking over the direction of more men and money and subsidiary companies.

One of the displaced directors, a man called Rasmussen, said : " This is your trick, Hurwitz. But I warn you that big business is in arms against you. Skardon and Caron and—"

But a colleague leaned across and whispered urgently, and Rasmusson relapsed into silence. His little eyes centred malevolently upon Hurwitz.

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Hurwitz laughed. "I understand your threats well enough, Rasmusson. Let the big boys do what they will. All you are concerned with is this company ; which is no longer yours, but mine—ours, rather."

"To hell with an Aristo who brings in non-Aristos," said Rasmusson, and there was a rumble of assent around the big shining table. Hurwitz did not betray by so much as a blink of his eyelid that he heard or cared.

They left with as much dignity as they had arrived. Ed again pleaded an appointment and Hurwitz asked Justin to join him for lunch.

"Sorry, Paul. But I, too, have an appointment—"

"An assignation, he means, Paul," Ed leered.

Hurwitz looked interested.

"Well," said Justin uncomfortably. "I've met a girl, a young lady rather. I have a luncheon engagement."

"Who is she, Julian ? Do we know her ?"

Ed pricked up his ears.

Justin felt that, much as he could afford to ignore or rag Ed, he could not conceal unnecessary details from Hurwitz.

"I don't think so," he said. "She's Miss Freeman, Estelle Freeman. Apart from that, I know nothing. That's what I have to find out."

"We wish you luck at your discoveries, then, Julian."

Hurwitz and Ed, chuckling went off, leaving Justin to dress himself carefully in his best and arrive at the rendezvous thirty minutes early and smoke cigarettes until she arrived. When, at long long last—three and a half minutes late—she appeared, they started off on their second round of exploration of the best that Mytilene could offer.

Even two young people so athirst for experiences as Justin and Estelle could not hope to run through all that this fabulous agglomeration of planets and planetoids had to offer. Without leaving the enveloping globe of air it was possible to sample all the various types of life and pleasure common in the galactic worlds ; in moderation, of course. The variety in even a small portion of the galaxy was so staggering that no one in his right mind would hope or dare to compress it all into one relatively small group of planets. But, as Justin remarked, puffing out his cheeks, they'd certainly tried !

For him the colour periods flew by far too rapidly, like the flight of doves before a storm, and he knew uneasily that his days on Mytilene were numbered. Hurwitz, with the unrelenting patience and persistence of an Aristo, had lined up

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his business contacts and had then ploughed through them remorselessly. The triumvirate was far richer and more powerful now than it had been when it had arrived. This knowledge warmed Justin. So far, he had not been invited by Estelle to meet her parents or family, and he had sensed the barrier that stood between them all too clearly because of the girl's complete abandonment of any other distinction between them. By grasping at every soldar he hoped to smash through that indifferent wall.

The point had been reached, for Justin at least, where mere wealth now meant nothing. He wanted power, and he wanted the power and prestige that money can only partially buy.

He practised conscientiously with his robo linguist, perfecting his command of Aristo English. He could now read and write without thought, and had gone on to robo hypnotic courses of higher education. Ed chaffed him, and went his own reckless way, amassing a sizeable private fortune and then, time after time, losing it all in some apparently foolproof scheme. He would shrug and smile and, with the aid of his needle and Justin's colours, start again.

" What the blazes do you want to bother about this private money-grubbing for, Ed ?" demanded Justin one day during Azure, when he wanted to meet Estelle and Ed wanted him to go to a financial meeting which was, he was promised, the ' cinch of the century.'

" My old grannie used to say that money shared is no one's money unless you have your hooks on it."

" Well ?"

" All our cash is tied up with Paul. Oh, sure, he's safe enough. But I like to hear the jingle of the soldars in *my* purse."

This gave Justin to think ; thereafter he took and banked a fair proportion of their profits ; Hurwitz laughed and did not complain. And Estelle ate into his blood like fire. He was beginning to have that queasy feeling that he knew presaged uncomfortable events and, with Ed's growing recklessness and Hurwitz's absorbed preoccupation with fresh campaigns and raids, Justin felt uneasily that they were, perhaps, in danger of losing something precious in their comradeship, that they were chasing the shadow instead of the substance. He tried to put this irrational feeling into words that would mean something to the others ; but they just laughed. Hurwitz said to leave the schemes to him, and Ed patted his gun and said to leave the

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protection to Justin and Ed's gun—and Justin walked off in disgust.

That colour period—Orange it was, symbolically—he came nearer to calling the whole scheme off and taking Estelle away with him, preferably to Earth, and there marrying and settling down, outside the Pool, on the money he now had standing to his name in the Galactic Bank.

Even Estelle's whims no longer infuriated him in face of his growing unease. She would not let him accompany her home, and refused to tell him anything about her family, apart from the fact that he had already guessed that they were high-ranking Aristos. She called it first-class balancing Aristo, but that meant nothing to Justin.

The blow-up, when it came, was as usual over a trifle.

Estelle had been babbling about their never having gone to Mytilene, and when Justin had asked her what she was talking about, she burst out passionately :

" Here we've been hopping from planet to planet, having a good time, spending every minute lapping up the pleasures of the galaxy—"

" Is this wrong ?" Justin asked. To him, the experience had been fantastically wonderful. The fact that Estelle had shared it with him had made it just that much more memorable.

" No. No, of course it isn't wrong. I didn't mean that." She laughed. " You probably think I'm just a fluffy good-time girl—"

" No, no," Justin protested automatically.

" But the truth is that I have a great interest in the humane sciences and, also, in the arts."

Justin himself was just mugging up, as Ed inelegantly phrased it, on these very subjects, so he was able to nod as though he followed Estelle's mind perfectly.

" Archaeology," she went on, " is my passion."

Here Justin felt on firmer ground. He made a few casual remarks, and succeeded in giving the impression he wished to create of an intelligent and educated man with an interest in the general field of archaeology.

"So," Estelle said firmly. "Next Citron we go to Mytilene."

" Ah—yes," Justin said. He didn't know what she was talking about. " That's a good idea," he said enthusiastically. " I've a few business matters to clear up. We'll go right on the dot of Citron." That was about four hours ahead.

They parted on that, and Justin hurried back to find Ed. The voluble man was silently poring over a notebook.

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" Ed," burst out Justin. " Where are we now ?"

" In our hotel bedroom, nitwit. Why don't you let a man concentrate on his figures—?"

" No. No, I mean, what planet ?"

" Oh, come off it, Julian ! We're on a collection of planets called Mytilene. So what's the idea ?"

" All right, then. If that's so, how can we go to Mytilene ?"

" Huh ?" said Ed.

At that moment the door opened and Hurwitz bustled in. He was smiling. " It's all set," he said at once. He would have gone on talking ; but Justin was so wrought up with his problem and Ed's indifference, that he butted in.

" Say, Paul, how can I go to Mytilene from here ?"

" Why, take a flier and fly straight there, Julian." Hurwitz was impatient. " Now, what we have to do if everything—"

" But where, Paul ?"

" Where what ? What are you babbling about ? Skardon and Caron and a gang of the other big-time boys are closing in on us and we have to take them strictly to schedule—"

" Where the hell *is* Mytilene, Paul !"

Hurwitz stared hard at Justin. Then he said : " Mytilene is the old original central planet of this swarm. It was the one on which they built the machines by which they maintain the other planets and suns here. It is very old and there are disputed traces of an earlier civilisation there." He smiled bleakly. "Now are you satisfied ? Is your thirst for knowledge quenched ?"

" I think so. There is something I have to do—"

" You're right. There is. Now listen to what I have to say with that single-track mind of yours. We planned to handle Gorgon Industries, and with Skardon on planet—his brother Louis can be written off—we had a fine opportunity to hand. Well, the hunted have turned hunters. It was to be expected, of course."

" You mean we're in danger ?" asked Ed, closing his notebook and pricking up his ears.

" Yes. That is exactly what I mean. I know you two are only ordinary men, well, near enough ordinary not to make much difference ; but I want you to forget your private transactions, Ed, and you, Julian, to forget your woman." Hurwitz stared hard at them both. " We're going to Earth. And we're not going to leave one another's company from now on !"

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sixteen

" But that's impossible !" cried both Justin and Ed together.

Hurwitz showed his teeth. " I don't think so. We have to stick together in our physical bodies now just as much as we have done with our plans and thoughts and schemes in the past. If the big business Combines are out for my blood, then a long range radio-hookup will not be fast enough."

" But it's always worked before !" protested Ed. " That time when the assassins were waiting for you in your space yacht with flareguns on Lethonee V, Julian was on Lethonee III and he smelled his colours and radioed you at once. Your bodyguards went into the yacht and cleaned up. And all the other times Julian's colours have saved you—"

" Our personal radios are fine, and I intend to use them in the future. But if we are to travel to Earth and push through my plans, then we must have split second protection. It's absolutely vital."

Justin thought of Estelle and the proposed trip to Mytilene —the old, original, ancient planet of Mytilene. He felt no desire to go there now. He just wanted five minutes alone with Estelle, face to face. A tv screen hookup would be valueless. He wanted to take her flesh and blood body into his arms. An image on a screen would merely tantalise ; would be worse than nothing.

" I'd like—" he began, but Hurwitz chopped him off, and began issuing the time table. Justin listened. Ed had accepted the situation, and was clearly anxious to be off Mytilene and on the way to Earth. Then, quietly, patiently and very sincerely, Justin put his position and asked that he might say goodbye to Estelle.

" You must see that's impossible, Julian. The assassins are probably on their way here now . . ."

Both Ed and Hurwitz stared at Justin. Their faces—even the Aristo's—grew hard and thin and mean.

Justin shook his head numbly. " No colours," he said hoarsely.

Ed shouted : " If your damned love-life has fouled up your danger warnings, Julian, I'll—I'll—"

" I'm sure they haven't. The lack of colours proves we have some time . . ."

" Just time enough to get aboard the spaceship and high-tail it out of here. Ring here from the spaceport." Hurwitz flicked

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his fingers around the room. " Pack what you want. We leave in five minutes."

Ten minutes later they were in the flier heading for the spaceport.

Justin slumped in a corner, the soft cushions like a bed of nails. At the spaceport he raced for a telebooth and dialled the restaurant where he was to meet Estelle. Azure had not yet begun, and she was not there. " Why didn't she tell me her phone number ?" He raged uselessly. He left a message. They could contact each other through the Galactic Bank. Then Ed hammered on the glass door and they all ran through the lobby and were carried up the ramp and into the spaceship. Justin felt as though he was leaving all his insides back on Mytilene.

No messages reached him aboard the spaceship and he felt the cold numbness still within him throughout the journey through hyperspace. When they touched down on Earth he had none of the bubbling delight he had had so long anticipated would be fermenting in him as he landed once again upon the planet of his birth. He had thought that he would change and rush off to the Pool. Instead, he lounged about the hotel room —always hotel rooms, monotonous in their luxurious uniformity—and moped. Ed tried to chafe him, and Hurwitz to interest him in their joint plans.

" I'm here to provide cover," he said. " I don't pretend to understand Aristo high finance."

And that, too, was strange. He had always thought, since meeting Hurwitz, that he, too, would take some part in the planning and the scheming, in the raids and take overs and the big business world of Aristo life. Men visited them at the hotel, and each was carefully vetted by Justin. At first they were all clean.

The first time his colours flamed the caller was a rough, tough, near-Aristo who was dealt with by Hurwitz's guards. " Shostache. A good man," they reported laconically.

Hurwitz was employing bodyguards from Kramer, and the account was important enough for Kramer's son to call around, sip a drink, and talk pleasantries.

" Shostache and G.W. are both firms," he said to the three accomplices. " As yet we don't know if Perseus or Galkill are involved ; but we think that Granger will be brought in. The Skardon family have always employed them."

" They retain Shield Bearers, don't they ?" asked Ed.

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Kramer laughed. "Yes. S.B. are the biggest ; they tend to be a little out of touch with their clients at times."

"We certainly appreciate your calling around, Kramer," said Hurwitz. "I've no complaint about your men."

"Thank you, Mister Hurwitz. What puzzles me is the way you pick out the wrong 'uns from your callers."

"Call it colourful presentiments," Justin broke in, bitterly. "There's another johnny on his way in."

Kramer looked at him sharply. Hurwitz said, quickly : "Yep. Seems like we're due for another call from one of the Guilds. You'll see to it, Kramer ?"

"Already have, Mister Hurwitz." Kramer indicated his wrist radio. "My men are dealing now."

The pattern held up. Ed became fascinated by Hurwitz's grasp of financial matters, and reported periodically to Justin how the battle on 'change was going. Justin was not interested. His bank branch in the hotel had no messages for him. He moped and couldn't eat and smoked too much.

He was in the bathroom when his colours smelled wrong. He contacted Hurwitz on the wrist radio without bothering to go through into the lounge, and Hurwitz passed on the necessary instructions. That made Justin make his mind up. He felt absolutely convinced that he could warn Hurwitz in time to prevent a kill ; and Kramer had impressed him by his efficiency and his men's absolute certainty of one hundred per cent protection. Now all that remained was the message.

It did not come.

Was it merely girlish contrariness that was making Estelle ignore him ? He had tried to send messages to her through the Galactic Bank ; but all had been returned marked 'unknown.' So she'd used an assumed name, then. Minx. He felt depressed, worried, on edge. Yet, through all this sad and dramatic self-pity, he could still see the humorous side of his predicament, and he surprised himself by the savagery of his laughter at the thought. He was rapidly losing control of himself and the prospect frightened him.

His loyalty remained firm to the triumvirate just so long as he could not contact Estelle. After all, they were doing what they had planned to do. Now, at the very crisis of their schemes, what sort of comrade would he be if he slunk off after a woman and left his friends to the knives and guns of their opponents in the business jungle ?

They went well protected to the Stock Exchange and there Justin saw with lack lustre eyes the marvels of cybernetic

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engineering which could throw onto a screen in this huge room details of the business worlds far across the Galaxy. He simply sat, quietly, waiting until it was time to go back to the hotel and he could check if a message had been left.

Only once were his colours altered in 'change. He told Hurwitz. The Aristo laughed. He nodded his head.

" That's the fellow you're getting your colour warnings from, Julian. No one is allowed weapons on 'change. But he'd cheerfully shoot me down outside if he had half a chance."

Justin looked idly at the man indicated by Hurwitz's nod. Overly handsome, dark-haired, ruthless—and with an elusive air of familiarity, as though they'd met casually in the past.

" That, my friends," said Hurwitz, " is Young Eli Skardon."

" Isn't he the brother or something of—?" said Ed.

" Cousin," Hurwitz said shortly. " Estelle Skardon's father, Harold, is that young puppy's uncle."

" Estelle," said Justin, looking up. " Don't speak to me of Estelles. They're a mean, cruel, laughing, couldn't-careless breed of womenkind. If your Estelle plays you up like mine Paul, well, I feel very very sorry for you."

Even then Justin noted the traces of discomfort in the Aristo, and he felt vague surprise. Hurwitz must have it very bad for this Skardon girl ; and that, of course, explained a great deal of his pursuit of the Skardon pere. He disliked Eli Skardon on sight, and remained on his seat in the shadows.

" Now he's gone by the colours have faded. But he looks a vicious customer."

" We'll worry about him when we've taken over Gorgon."

" That'll be the day," said Ed enthusiastically.

Business followed its normal routine. They visited many of the vast factories and plants and yards taken over by their combine, and, somehow, the days passed. And with each passing day the pressures against Gorgon Industries built up. They left the hotel and moved into the penthouse luxury suite of the administration block of Urals Steel, their latest acquisition. Their retinue of secretaries, robo servants and bodyguards from Kramers moved with them.

" We're approaching some of the goals we set ourselves when we talked in the ocean of grass under the stars of Erinore," said Hurwitz. " How does it feel ?"

" Grand !" declared Ed. " Let's get at the rest of em."

" Oh, it's all right, I suppose," Justin said. " But what's the end of it all ? Do we just go on and on ? Haven't we enough money and power now, without struggling for more ?"

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" Here, Julian !" protested Ed. " You sure you know what you're talking about ? You feel all right ?" he added anxiously.

" Of course I'm not all right !" Justin was angry. " I'm wondering what's happened to Estelle. Why she hasn't contacted me. What's she doing on Mytilene, that's what I'd like to know."

" At least you don't know what your Eastelle s doing," Hurwitz said in his clipped Aristo manner. " Mine, if I may use the word, is shut up by her father at their plant and no one is allowed to see her. No one. And no one knows the reasons for this high-handed treatment."

" Why don't you hint to Skardon that the pressures on his Company might slacken if you and his girl got together ?" Ed spoke with practical concern for one of his comrades.

Hurwitz said : " You mean you'd be willing to forego the taking over of Gorgon on my account, Ed ?"

" Sure. Sure, Paul." Ed was gesturing magniloquently. " We've got a million companies. Why bother about one ?"

Hurwitz was trembling very slightly now, Justin saw with the detached eye of the clinician. He was like a thoroughbred just reaching the peak of form. Another few moments of indecision might see him sweating and trembling past control —and for an Aristo that would be like the whole Stock Exchange falling flat.

" How do you feel on—on this suggestion, Julian ?"

" I've told you. I'm not bothered one way or the other. I think that perhaps we have gone far enough and now's the time to call quits, before the big boys shut us up permanently."

" They won't do that with you around, Julian," said Ed.

" If you two agree . . ."

" Contact Skardon right away and put him a proposition," said Ed. He riffled out his notebook as though the matter was finished.

" Yes, Paul." Justin felt a flicker of their comradeship within him. " Of course. One company, however big and however much we've planned its takeover, can't weigh against your happiness. Hell, I could tell you that."

" Thank you, both," said Hurwitz, and ran to the robo tele booth. When he returned he was smiling. " We see Skardon tomorrow," he said. He added, as an afterthought : " I told him I particularly wanted Estelle Skardon to be there. He caught on. She will be."

Ed said, casually : " I'm looking forward to meeting her."

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seveteen

" So that's the position," Harold Skardon said brusquely, trying to pass it all off as a mere matter of policy decision. " Hurwitz is seeing me tomorrow and we do a deal."

Louis licked his lips and glanced sideways at his son, sitting slumped in the leather boardroom chair. Eli was not forthcoming ; he remained silent.

" What—uh—concessions are we expected to provide ?" Louis spoke diffidently.

" Concessions ?" Skardon laughed unpleasantly. " Nothing that you need worry yourselves about. I've talked to Estelle and it seems that she is prepared to behave like an Aristo—"

Eli sat up. He pushed his body up from the table and stared hard at his uncle. " What has Estelle to do with this ?"

" As my daughter who is not yet twenty one, she is involved to the extent that her matrimonial plans are being made for her by me. I know what's best for her."

" What does she say ?"

" Eli !" said his father, disturbed at the tone in his son's voice.

Skardon waved his brother down. " We all know how Eli feels about this situation. But that doesn't alter my decision. In Aristo business, the Company comes first. It's about time you learned that, Young Eli."

" So you'd sell her to stop Hurwitz from—"

Skardon stood up. " We sometimes allow our emotions to become obvious when among ourselves," he said icily. " But do not forget, please, that we are Aristos. It seems to me, Eli, that you are acting rather like a human being. And that is fatal to an Aristo. Never forget that."

Eli's handsomeness was marred by the ugly frown. He in turn stood up, and uncle and nephew faced each other across the sitting form of Louis ; the blades had been unsheathed and now the fight was in the open.

" You have been trying to dispose of Hurwitz for some time now." Eli spoke as though reading a brief. " All your efforts plus those of the Carons and the Farnhams and God knows who else have failed utterly and miserably. I think that now it is my turn. You say we are meeting Hurwitz tomorrow. I shall know how to deal with this threat to the family ; even if you have so far forgotten your Aristo honour as to sell your daughter—"

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" Please leave the boardroom, Young Eli." Skardon's face was quite composed ; but the line of his jaw and the tilt of his chin made Eli suddenly obey. There was a chill in the room. Without another word, Eli went out.

Louis said : " Don't be too hard on the boy, Harry. He loves your daughter. You know that. We all wonder why you sent her away to her aunt's and refused her permission either to stay on Earth or Mytilene and stopped her mail. Is there something else more serious . . .?"

Skardon sat down again. His thick body dominated the shining empty expanse of the table. Boardroom tables, these days, were symbolic objects only.

" Yes, Louis, there is. There's no reason why you shouldn't know about it. Estelle's formed an attachment for a non-Aristo lad—"

" No !" Louis was genuinely shocked.

" But yes. Oh, there's Aristo blood in him somewhere, that seems plain enough. I had a file on him, and my agents gave me everything. The odd thing is that he's tied up with Hurwitz in some way. He and some friend or other were bought out of the Construction Crews and joined Hurwitz's Company. Digging deeper my men found that he came from the Pool and that his father was unknown. It seems perfectly obvious that his father was an Aristo out on a spree, who left a legacy behind when he tired of his lady-love in the dubious delights of the Pool. They even checked with his family in the Pool, who think he is dead."

"You'd have thought he'd find a way back to see them . . ."

" Apparently not. Hurwitz has some hold over him, I'm sure. And the other clown in their combine. He dabbles on 'change at long range and—"

" A non-Aristo trying to balance on 'change ?" Louis laughed, a genuine laugh of surprised amusement.

Skardon laughed, too. " Hell, yes, Louis. It is funny, when you think of it. He can't figure out why it is that he is beaten so often. And yet, you know, he has some shrewd strokes, some uncanny luck—"

" For a non-Aristo, what else could it be ?"

" True. But this luck seems to extend to Hurwitz. He's succeeded so far in avoiding all Granger's men. And the other Assassins, too. There's something there I don't quite understand. And that intrigues me. It'll demand some fine and interesting balancing, Louis."

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" Well, we have until tomorrow to plan the best we can do on balance."

" The planning we have to do depends on Estelle . . ."

And, walking rapidly away along the corridor, Eli Skardon, too, was maturing plans for tomorrow ; plans that involved his immediate contact with friends of the most disreputable in the Pool.

Justin had given up hope when the message arrived.

He switched off the screen with shaking hands and sat back, stunned, almost disbelieving. Estelle had called him ; she was on Earth ; she insisted on meeting him that very evening. He let out a great whoop of joy and went charging into his private dressing room and sent his robots into a mechanical frenzy selecting and dressing him in clothes that would be suitable for this supreme occasion.

He had forgotten completely that Hurwitz and Ed existed. They were in the luxurious and complex apartments above Urals Steel somewhere ; he had no time for petty details of that sort now, there was time only for Estelle.

His private flier took him through the high speed lane across the evening sky above the city, sparkling with lights in confusing and brilliant patterns, lights that sprawled out as far as the eye could reach. Only in the centre of the city were the lights dimmed, irregular and scattered.

Julian Justin looked down on that dusky area of half-illumination, and unbidden, memories came up to haunt him.

Strange that Estelle had chosen to meet him on the outskirts of the Pool.

The flier cut him safely through the aerial traffic lanes, dropping him down on to the landing roof of a small villa set on the opposite bank from the Pool, facing the ramshackle tenement houses across the light-reflections of the river. The air here was sweet and clean, perfumed by night-flowering shrubs ; across the yellow river squeezed between its marble banks the air would be filled with carbon monoxide, decaying refuse and the stink of a neglected world. He shivered, pulled his cloak about him, and strode for the elevator.

She was waiting for him in a small, elegant, tastefully furnished room. The robot showed him in without emotion—naturally—but the absence of human servants, the deep quiet of the place, the dust sheets hastily tossed aside and the sudden unexpected smell of neglect here in this miniature palace, surprised and alarmed him. He hurried to Estelle and took her

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hands in his. She was pale and cold and there were purple circles beneath her eyes.

Abruptly, they were in each other's arms, and finally Justin knew that nothing else in the Galaxy mattered beside this. All that his companions might want from big business could go hang as far as he was concerned. He held her tightly for a long time, and neither spoke.

At last he released her gently. What he said he didn't know; words and broken phrases tumbled out. But he was brought to his senses by her words. She had resumed that stiff awkwardness, still and cold as an Etruscan tomb statue; remote.

"My father—my father has forbidden me to marry you, Julian. He says you are not an Aristo. I have disobeyed him in seeing you. He wishes me to cut you out of my life for ever."

The Galaxy fell in on Julian Justin.

"But he can't!" he raved when at last he could talk. "This isn't the old dark ages. A girl can marry who she likes. Tell him that. Tell him you love me and are going to marry me!"

Slowly, pitifully, she shook her head.

"I can't Julian. I can't. What father says is right. You don't understand. The blood lines must be preserved—"

The blood lines exploded in Justin's head at that moment. His frustrations of the past months waiting for word from Estelle and his growing conviction that something he could not comprehend was seriously wrong, coalesced. He could see his life shattering. He began to plead with the girl, beseeching her to come away with him, now, and together they could make a new life . . . It was hopeless.

"You see, Julian," she said tenderly. "I do love you; but you are a human being, and I am an Aristo."

"What does that matter?" he exclaimed impatiently. "You don't have two heads, do you? You aren't an alien? What is this nauseating affectation of superiority that you Aristos profess. Even—even a friend of mine who is an Aristo still cannot forget it, no matter how close we are."

"If," said a new and heavy male voice, "you are talking about Paul Hurwitz, he is a good enough Aristo to know what is fitting in these matters."

"Father!" said Estelle. She shrank back.

Slowly, Justin turned. He stood erect, shoulders back, as though on some old C.C. parade, and his eyes were level and smouldering as they met those of this man who dared to

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interfere with his happiness and presume to dictate his life to him. He took in the Aristo at a glance. He had seen him strutting through the Stock Exchange. And he had seen him sitting humbled before the impact of Hurwitz's schemes. He had no fear of this old martinet.

" I have no wish to quarrel with you, Freeman," he said. " But I suggest, in a friendly way, you understand, that you get to hell out of here and let me talk to your daughter privately."

" Freeman ?" the man said. He raised his brows at Estelle.

She turned at once to Justin. " I am sorry, Julian ; but I thought it best. My name isn't Freeman. As an Aristo I had to change it to avoid an admirer in a position which was embarrassing to me. You shouldn't mind ; it does not change my feeling for you."

Justin didn't mind. He couldn't—just then—have cared less what Estelle called herself. He said : " It doesn't matter. Your name will be Estelle Justin as soon as—"

" I think not." Estelle's father's face remained impassive. He said in measured tones. " At the moment what does matter is that my daughter's names is Estelle Skardon, and that I am Harold Vladimir Skardon. Does that mean anything to you, Justin ?"

For the second time within the quarter hour, the Galaxy fell in on Julian Justin.

He said : " I didn't walk in here unarmed, you know. What's to prevent me from shooting you down like the—"

" A great deal, Justin. But most of all, I should imagine, the regard you entertain for my daughter. I hardly think she would marry the man who killed her father."

Justin's colours weren't working, of course. They were deadened by the thunder of his own emotions, just as they had been when Bella Rose had died. He showed no surprise when the Shield Bearer men walked quietly into the room and ranged themselves around the walls. Even so, he didn't think he had reached the end of the road—not quite yet, at least.

" What are these," he asked contemptuously, " Witnesses or killers ?"

" Neither." Skardon's tones were mild and, oddly, there was pity in his voice. " They will take no notice of anything that is said here. They will just protect my person."

Young Eli Skardon walked quickly into the fusty room, glanced about, and visibly relaxed. He said : " I had quite a time finding out where first Estelle and then you had gone. But I see I am in time for the kill."

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" There need be no killing." Skardon spoke evenly.

" The clown's a non-Aristo. We don't have to treat him with the kid-glove treatment you accord Hurwitz. Finish him off and toss him in the river. Then we can talk business with Hurwitz tomorrow . . ."

Through this a new and tormenting horror had seized Justin. Paul Hurwitz ! Of course—he had completely forgotten that Hurwitz's Estelle, the woman for whom he was prepared to give up taking over the Empire of Gorgon Industries, was the same Estelle, was the girl in this room. He and Hurwitz loved the same girl ! And the implications were only now reaching him. Memories of their old comradeship on Erinore rose up in his mind ; he thought of the ocean of grass, and the bird's saving blood, and the tuber and the way his makeshift knife had sliced into it. And he thought of the way Hurwitz had played scrupulously fair with him and Ed in all their transactions.

Young Eli was speaking and his hateful voice broke down the chains of nostalgic memory in Justin's mind.

" Why can't you get rid of him now ?"

Justin came to life. " You Aristos think you are the gift of the gods to the Galaxy." There was passion in him now ; no fear. " I think you're a bunch of nincompoops. Even Estelle has no time for you now ! Let Estelle make up her own mind—"

" It is not as simple as that." Skardon would have gone on but Eli, his Aristo blood tingling in him, tumbled caution away in his cold Aristo contempt.

" You're going to die, anyway, Justin, so there is no reason why you should not know the facts. You are a mere human being. We are Aristos."

" I feel sorry for you." Justin's words stung.

" Have you ever seen a first class balancing Aristo at work, Justin ? Have you ever wondered why it is that Aristos can so easily maintain their supremacy in the business world, and that, as you know, means all the world that matters these days ? Have you ever seen an ill Aristo ? An Aristo worried to distraction ? Unable to concentrate ? Undecided ? Have you ? Have you ever seen an Aristo suffering from the petty ills and mental storms that afflict you poor humans ?"

Justin began to get the drift of what was going on. He was being told things that were normally never talked about, merely

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because those who knew had no need to discuss them and those who did not know had no inkling of their existence.

" What are you trying to tell me ?" he said slowly.

Skardon said : " My nephew seems intent on telling you why you cannot win. As, of course, you cannot. Tell me, Julian Justin, have you ever heard of the concept of the Superman ?"

" Of course. It's been discussed for thousands of years." Justin was becoming involved in this. " Don't tell me you are all supermen," he said derisively.

" Tell me what you think would be the qualities of a Superman," Skardon said, quite seriously.

The atmosphere had changed. The whole situation had resolved into an intellectual discussion ; it was difficult to remember that death lay at the end of the pleasant talk.

" Well," Justin said. " Telepathy, giant mental powers, possibly teleportation, telekinesis, stuff like that. What they used to call the psi faculties. They've never been found or proved satisfactorily in anyone yet. There is no such thing—yet—as a Superman."

"Quite so. The popular view of what Homo Superior would be."

Eli laughed. " A whole load of hogwash," he said blunty.

" Have you any idea of the theories of Evolution, Justin ?"

" Slightly." He wasn't going to let on that hypno tapes had given him education so recently. " An organism develops through occasional mutations, and through the pressures of its environment, so that the fittest survive. Those unsuited to changes in the environment do not live on, but it is a gradual change, brought about over many years. Sometimes, there is what appears to be a dramatic and sudden change—"

" Sometimes. That is usually when the environment kills off those unsuited, as it did when the dinosaurs vanished. Usually, a species changes over the years. When mankind began to use his brain those men whose brains weren't developed enough were those stupid enough to be killed off. So the cleverer men survived. But all the stupid men weren't killed in one fell swoop. There were advanced and retarded races living together."

" So you're the advanced race and we're the retarded ?"

Skardon ignored that. He, too, was caught up in telling what had changed men into Aristos. He went on : " A man who lives in poverty, shivering with cold, hungry, unable to

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provide for his wife and children is a failure. A man who can take his own environment and use it to bring him creature comforts—not neglecting the higher functions of human aspirations—is a success. Big business men today are all successful. Why? Because they have adapted with the business environment that has replaced the old cave and fire and sabre-tooth environment when the last great evolutionary changes were taking place.'

Justin was sure, now, that he knew what they were talking about; and the knowledge made him even more determined to break out of here. "I've seen Paul Hurwitz working."

"An Aristo," Eli said, flicking his contempt, "can handle many problems at once, can talk on more than one level and carry on a range of telephone and tv conversations at the same time. He can work hard in a smoke-filled room. He can walk through city traffic without danger. He can tolerate noise of industry. He can sit at a desk working for hours at a stretch, and not feel fatigued, and he can remain fit without outdoor exercise. All these things you have noticed about Hurwitz."

"That's true."

"Rapid decisions are habitual for an Aristo, he can argue and thrash out business matters in a tenth of the time you would take even to grasp what the problem was, he is the complete business tycoon, naturally, without strain. He is born with these accomplishments, as you are born with a beating heart."

"Tell me," said Justin. "What does 'balancing' mean?" Shardon smiled. "That, of course, is the nub of it all."

"Your clownish friend tried to make money on the Stock Exchange. He was finished before he even began. He doesn't know—as you do not—what balancing is. An Aristo is born with the capacity to judge stocks and shares, to see the conclusions of actions initiated by him, he can, as they say 'figure the odds' without conscious thought. Gambling is no gamble to an Aristo. The environmental pressures of big business through the years have resulted in the development of a new type of man who has adapted to think and live in terms of big business. You couldn't beat that."

"And I suppose you call yourselves Homo Bigbusiness-iensis."

"No. We call ourselves Homo sapiens."

"Really. So—?"

"So we call your sort Homo moronicus."

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eighteen

The meeting had been called, and outside the closed doors groups of the Brotherhoods of Assassins and Bodyguards stood talking quietly to one another. Occasionally there would be a spurt of laughter as they discussed some old assignment ; men who perhaps only the day before had been shooting to kill now stood talking in professional amity. On the morrow, on other assignments, they would again, very probably, be trying to kill one another as part of that profession they followed.

The truce that allowed this shop-talk had taken their principals into a lofty-ceilinged, wide room of many mirrors and windows, of comfortable chairs and robo attendants.

Harold Vladimir Skardon sat at the head of the table. On his right sat his brother Louis. On his left, slouching, sat Eli Skardon. Facing them sat Hurwitz, flanked on his right by Ed. Sitting against the wall, hand in hand, were Justin and Estelle. This concession had been granted, casually, by Skardon as soon as the meeting opened. Justin hadn't bothered to ask why, after his night of captivity, he hadn't been killed out of hand. He guessed that other wheels had been turning and that the Aristos' balancing powers had been turned loose—frighteningly—on the problem of the future of Julian Justin.

The revelations of the Aristos' position in the upward progress of evolution had, after the first dazed recognition, hardly bothered him. His only thought, now, was of the safety and happiness of Estelle. Whilst the principals talked quietly, he talked even more quietly to the girl.

" I didn't know that Hurwitz was talking of you when he kept on about his Estelle;" he said.

She was still pale, distraught, without makeup and in her young helpless softness tearing at his feelings.

" I always made fun of Paul. Laughed at his clumsy proposals. But if I hadn't met you, Julian, I should have married him. He's my kind of man—"

" He's an Aristo."

" Oh, does that matter now !"

" Your father—all Aristos—think so."

" I'm an Aristo and I don't think so."

Justin remained silent. Her words re-echoed in his brain. " I m an Aristo." He knew what she would sacrifice if she married him. And he knew that, unless he was very lucky and

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Hurwitz still maintained their old relationship, he could never support her in Aristo fashion. It would mean a Company badge and a lackey's job—or the Pool.

As for Hurwitz himself ; after he had realised the relationship of Justin and Estelle and understood that Justin's Estelle was his own, he had frozen into a mask that nothing Justin said could pierce. Justin felt profoundly sorry for his comrade—and wondered how Ed would view this smash-up of the triumvirate. No one was coming out of this debacle whole ; that at least he saw clearly enough.

Skardon and Hurwitz still had material over which to argue. They went at the problem in Aristo fashion, their brains working in lightning shafts of logic that Justin, for one, could not follow. His colours had returned. They glimmered now, mocking him with their uselessness. He understood now that he had sensed Estelle's danger in the flying bowl only because she was the woman he loved ; that was the only explanation. He knew there was danger ahead because his colours told him so ; but from which direction it would come with danger all about he did not know.

Hurwitz made it plain that he was capable of smashing Gorgon Industries if he wished.

" But if Estelle agrees to marry you, you will not do so ?"

" Until today, that was my idea. Now that Justin has posed a fresh problem, re-thinking is necessary."

Justin, not without much agony of effort and thought, had made up his mind. He said, more to Skardon than Hurwitz, speaking slowly and not looking at Estelle : " I am not an Aristo. I now understand what that means." He released her hand. " No, Estelle, let me finish. The situation is clear. I could never make Estelle happy. I recognise that." It was difficult to go on. " I know that Paul loves her, and I know that, in time, Estelle will—will forget me, and—"

" No, Julian, no !" Estelle's face was flaming.

" I think," her father said gently, " that what Justin says is right."

" If you all agree, I relinquish whatever claims I may have had on Estelle. She shall, if she wishes, marry Paul. Gorgon Industries will then, in fact, form a combine with us, and we—or, rather, Paul—can co-operate with you, Skardon. I'm not sure what I shall do. That depends on what Paul and Ed say."

Estelle—Aristo or not, superwoman or not—was crying.

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Hurwitz turned to face Justin. His face was blank and staring, and his eyes burned feverishly.

" You'd do that, for me, Julian ?"

" Yes, for you—and for Estelle." He laughed, and tried to make it as cynical as possible. " Also I might save my life that way."

" That's true," Skardon said, heavily, pleased at any excuse to ease his conscience over Estelle. In a few years, when she more clearly understood what being an Aristo meant . . . Time healed everything, even the scars on an Aristo's eidetic memory. The memories would be there ; but they would have lost their sting.

Hurwitz said numbly : " I can't let you do it, Julian. I'll see that these assassins don't kill you. For the sake of our comradeship—I cannot accept."

" I thought you might say that, Paul. I expected it. But, although it is a very fine gesture, that is all it is. I am thinking of Estelle in this. She could never love a non-Aristo—"

" But you're half Aristo !" Estelle broke in violently.

The shock of that couldn't touch Justin now. Anyway, he had always half-suspected it.

" That means nothing. My colours of self-preservation, then, stem from an Aristo father. I'm a sort of poor-man's-superman." He laughed, coldly. " And what good are my colours to me, now ?"

Eli spoke, suddenly, sharply. " Uncle Harold." He sat taut, tense, trembling with hidden Aristo passions. The very address he used, ' Uncle Harold ' betrayed his unusually off-balance remarks. " Have you balanced this out—lately ?"

Skardon said at once : " Yes. On balance, this is the answer."

" I—see." Eli sat back, slouching again, fingers toying with a steel paper knife on the desk blotter.

Skardon thought he knew what prompted that outburst. He had not forgotten—as an Aristo he couldn't—that Eli, too, loved his daughter. The young man was unpredictable and his request set up an unease in his uncle ; Skardon began again to balance out this problem.

He had, over the past months, amassed enough evidence to point unerringly at Young Eli—not Old Eli—as the hidden hand pressuring both Skardon Sales and Gorgon Industries. That pressure had slackened at moments when things had gone

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Eli's way, and had increased when Eli had been losing. Now it seemed that Eli was losing everything he had gambled for ; and the idea of that troubled Skardon. The mere fact that his nephew had set assassins on him did not trouble him ; he had not been killed, and he knew where the threat was originating and could take the necessary steps. The youngster would need cutting down to size. If necessary Granger could—well, he hoped that that ultimate solution would not be necessary.

But, after all that, what had Eli meant when he asked if he had balanced it out lately ?

In the high room with the shining mirrors and windows the atmosphere of tension and unease was choking at all their throats, Aristo and Homo moronicus alike. Hidden passions were ready to spring into unusual life and through their repression to be all the more powerful and fatal. Destiny was at work, playing blindfold with the lives and happiness of men and women—and Aristos.

Justin was talking, now, to Ed. " I suppose you realise now why your grandiose schemes never worked ? I suppose you understand what sort of rat race you were getting into ?"

Ed had remained uncharacteristically silent during the meeting and it was obvious that he had suffered a severe shock on his discovery, through Justin, of just what being an Aristo meant. " A superman," he'd said. " So Paul's a blasted superman ! No wonder he had the markets cased." And, like any other man would, he'd gone on : " But I thought a superman would have fantastic mental powers, levitation, telepathy, psi stuff that would turn him into a mental wizard."

To which Justin had said tiredly : " That's the old-fashioned idea of what constitutes a superman, a member of Homo superior. But, as they explained, with radio so universal, tv and galaxy-wide hookups on tap at the mere turn of a switch, where was the environmental pressure to produce telepathy ? The pressures of an organism are those that strive to retard it when it must go forward ; if our modern world had been built up as it is without rapid communications and transport, then it would be valid to expect telepathy and teleportation. But not with science giving you just about those faculties through its mastery of machinery, electronics and nucleonics. The environment of the business world—with the Pool taking care of the incurably workshy and industry running on a union-organised closed-shop principle—was towards pressurising

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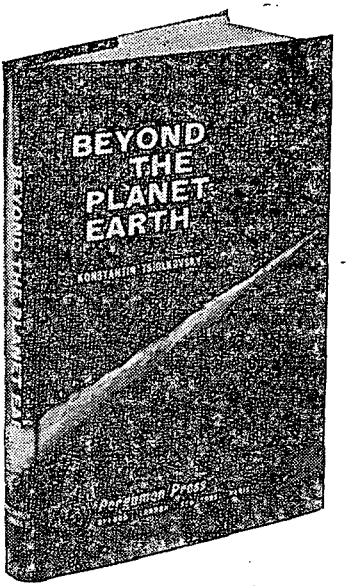

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those people with brains into finding out ways and means of staying on top and not being dragged down. That's environmental pressure. All the superhuman attributes of the Aristos are logical extensions of what already existed in the makeup of ordinary men. There's no fantastic mumbo-jumbo about it all."

Now, with Ed cowed and humbled, Justin was trying to rally him, turning to him for help and support. After all, he was the only other member of Homo moronicus in the room !

" You must do as you see fit, Julian," Ed said. " I've agreed to stay with Paul. If he marries Estelle and we join up with Gorgon, your colour presentiments will still be of great value, we'll still need you. But will you be able to live with us ?"

Justin so far had not faced the problem. Giving up Estelle, as he firmly intended to do, had drained him of nervous energy. If he had been an Aristo, now, why, he could have done that sort of trick half-a-dozen times before breakfast. He was growing rapidly cynical about it all, already trying on for size the mental coat of armour he would need against the dull and empty days ahead. If he lived.

" Well, then, that's settled," Skardon said briskly. " I'm sure, Estelle, my dear, that you will agree that everything is turning out for the best. You may not agree now ; but, on balance, I assure you, you will."

The very Homo moronicus-like fatuousness of the remark, for all its Aristo connotations of accuracy, brought a moment of silence.

Estelle said nothing ; but continued to weep.

Ed sat biting his pencil end.

Paul Hurwitz sat with his eyes closed, still and numbed.

Skardon was trying to force his personality over on everyone present.

Louis, as usual, said and did nothing.

Eli Skardon stood up. He expanded. He flowered. He spoke quickly into his wrist radio. Then, smiling and with a twist to that smile that made his face entirely fox-like, he addressed the others.

" So it is all settled ! Everything has been nicely smoothed out, and we have the touching picture of Justin here, an illegimate half-Aristo half-human, renouncing his girl to his pal, a full-fledged balancing Aristo. And, naturally, Hurwitz makes a faint-hearted protest, and Estelle marries him, and

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forgets the pitiful human being who crawls back to the filth of the Pool from whence he came—unasked."

Skardon said : " That's enough, Eli."

" I beg to differ. It is not nearly enough. I'm sick of your pomposity and my own father's spinelessness. It is time that fresh hands and brains took over Gorgon, and the other companies so kindly brought to this table by Hurwitz." Eli spoke his next words quite casually, yet with such a vicious meaning that Justin began to wake up.

" Of course," Eli said. " It is I who will marry Estelle."

Justin came fully awake now. The events of the past few hours had numbed him, as they had numbed Hurwitz. But now his Pool-bred resilience bolstered his will ; everything, yet, was not done. He knew that Estelle did not like Eli ; he had no need to think of what marriage to the man would do to her. Paul Hurwitz, at least, was a gentleman.

" And how do you propose to implement that, bub ?" he asked. His words were lost as everyone listened to Skardon.

" Please keep silent, Eli !" thundered Skardon.

" Eli . . ." said Louis.

Eli bent his head, suddenly. Then the smile left his face and, speaking into his wrist radio, his voice sounded quite clearly to the others. " No ! I'll sign the contract, if you wish, afterwards." A pause. Then : " Of course I understand we're not bound, yet. But you're in no position to bargain with me, or to make demands. Do the job, and then we'll agree on terms. I can get a dozen like you from the Pool."

Hurwitz surged to his feet. " You haven't—" he said, and his voice was drowned by Skardon's bull bellow.

" Call the guards !" Skardon, despite his anger, still retained his icy aristo composure ; his voice belled like a tocsin on Eli's plans.

" Please don't force *me* to use this on you," Eli said. He lifted the steal paper knife. " I employ men to do that sort of work."

Skardon sat down slowly. The bell push on the table before him had splintered from its plastic socket. Eli laughed.

" You should have realised that I would take all precautions This room is soundproof. Those guards could be on the other side of the Galaxy for all the good they will do you."

Louis said calmly : " Are you going to kill us all, my son ?"

" All except you and Estelle, father. Why ?"

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" Good God !" raged Skardon.

A mirror slid aside. A man entered, a lithe, dark, cloaked man wearing a grey mask and carrying a flare gun. Coldness entered with him. Eli gestured indolently.

" Not this man. Not this girl. The others are your concern."

" At least," Hurwitz said. " You couldn't hire an accredited Assassin man for your work. You had to go to the Pool. I should have known you, Eli, before this."

" I was never convinced that you could balance very well, Hurwitz."

Estelle, surprising everyone, threw herself across the table and flung her arms around her father. Justin, sitting silently in the shadow of a lamp's shade, watched her with understanding eyes. His first surprise at her action abated ; he recognised the gesture for what it was, and he knew that he had done right in renouncing this Aristo girl.

The Assassin lifted his flaregun. He said : " At the moment, Mister Skardon, I'm not under contract to you. I'd like you to make this assignment official. There are a number of targets. The job is a big one."

" How can you stand and speak so coldly about murder !" flamed Estelle. Her eyes glittered with tears.

" I'm sorry, lady," the assassin's flaregun did not waver an inch. He had, negligently, all of them under its muzzle. " This is just my job."

" And a fine chance it is for you, too." Eli spoke contemptuously, an Aristo speaking to a miserable specimen of Homo moronicus. " This could build you up ; I'll use you again. No contract now ; can't you get it over with ?"

Ed said : " I'm no Aristo, bub, You don't have to shoot me."

" Orders are orders, bub. Sorry."

Justin's colours ebbed. They faded. His brain was washed and clear and ticking. Sitting in shadow by the wall he watched with eyes that saw drama grind on to its destined end. whilst his brain worked out the chance given to him. The flaregun pointed now at Hurwitz.

" Start with him," said Eli.

Justin watched, his brain now icy cold, now on fire with anger and temptation. If Hurwitz was killed—and *then* . . .

He could scoop the pool—the Pool . . .

Continued on Page 122

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He stood up. He said softly: "Just a small time punk working out of Rafferty's. I might have known."

The flaregun swivelled so sharply he waited for the ripping sound as it snuffed out his life.

Eli shouted: "If you won't do the job I will!" He snatched the gun from the startled and offstride assassin's unexpectedly nerveless fingers. The gun swung towards Hurwitz. Ed dived under the table. Estelle screamed. Skardon shouted something unintelligible and Justin leaped.

He sprang forward and at an angle so that as he passed before Hurwitz he continued on straight for Eli. He didn't feel anything except deadness; he knew that both his legs were gone He crashed into Eli and knocked the flaregun spinning and then, because he had no legs to stand on, clung to the Aristo and together they fell to the ground.

"Here," a voice said. The Assassin slid the paper knife across the carpet. Fending off the roaring in his head, Justin seized the knife handle, turned it, thrust the blade as hard as he could with his failing strength into the soft flesh of the Aristo screaming beneath him.

"It's—nice—to hear an Aristo—screaming," he said.

The Assassin bent above him.

"You idiot—"

"Sorry, Raphe. Couldn't put you in a spot. Assassins' honour, you know."

"Oh, Julian! You idiot! I'd have—"

"Estelle." Justin put out a hand. His life blood was pumping out onto the carpet and no artificial heart or lungs were going to save him now. "*Estelle*!"

She was beside him, weeping, searching for his hand.

"Look after Paul—and Ed," he said. "You'll have to be the third of the triumvirate, now."

"Don't," she said, and choked on her words.

The room was greying off in a strange way. Dark streaks were rising up on every hand. The dead body of Eli lay a grotesque lump before him, across where his legs would have been if he still had any legs. Blood was everywhere.

They stood about him. Paul Hurwitz, Ed, Estelle, Raphe Bartram. They stood like trees in the twilight as the sun sinks. Blue shadows crept closer. Everything was all right now, though. He had always been the odd man out. Half-Aristo,

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half-human, he could never have found real happiness in this life.

One thing was certain ; Homo Sapiens or Homo moronicus, superman or human being, Death claimed them all impartially at the end.

" Be—happy," he said to Estelle, and tried to motion Hurwitz to take the girl in his arms. The Aristo understood and took Estelle into the crook of his arm. Even then, Justin tried to smile.

The last thing he saw was Estelle's face, tear drenched, staring at him like a luminous cloud from the gathering darkness.

But the last thing he heard was Raphe Bartram's soft whisper.

" Goodbye, Julian. Remember me to Bella Rose."

Kenneth Bulmer

* * *

Author's footnote

The two strands in *The Fatal Fire* that I mentioned last month can be considered mutually supporting. First off, the political and economic notion that a pool of unemployed to be drawn on when business is brisk and to be discarded on the dole when a depression sets in is not only commercial good sense to some, it has proved a workable solution to problems of an unbalanced economy ; that it is unprincipled and savagely anti-human affects only people with a social conscience.

The story assumes that after a lapse of time those people thus cut off from the rest of the commercial world, and also activated by their own growing antipathy not only for work but for all those at whose disposal it is given or withdrawn, would form their own community. A tightly knit group living in the tumbledown centre of a city in a future where disease can be controlled and where agriculture can scientifically produce enough, could survive. With the explosion of living space consequent on the introduction of rapid means of transport the moguls might not even care ; they wouldn't bother to clean out the Pools. In effect these non-employed would be taking in each other's washing ; with a topping-up influx of money from

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tasks that, whilst not being work in the accepted sense, would be asked of them by those living outside.

This background was assumed in ' Three Cornered Knife.'

The other skein in *The Fatal Fire* points up a situation that might be with us today. We would not, of course, know about it.

The conventional picture of the superman possessed of gigantic mental powers is not one I wish to deny, I merely indicate that it might not be as logical as some of us hope and I further surmise that a different form of superman is more logical.

If we accept that evolution did in fact work as we believe, did force animals to adapt and change, through mutation and the survival of the fitter, until at last man arrived, then the lesson that evolution teaches us is that it operates under pressure.

Going back into the mists of the past only as far as the fishes, we find that some fish were having a raw deal. They weren't making out in the seas. Very probably they were cousins of the Crossopterygians, the lobe-fins, who first developed lungs. The best known example is that living fossil, our old friend the Coelacanth.

They were chased out of the sea and stumbled about on land developing into the amphibians. They'd been forcibly kicked a step up the evolutionary ladder.

Later on, through pressures of finding water, protecting new born and walking at a gait more rapid than a side-to-side waddle, the reptiles came onto the scene. Evolutionary pressures caused mammals to develop, albeit in a very subordinate role. When the reptiles fell down on the job of being lords and masters of the Earth—a job they have held longer than any other species—the mammals stepped in.

Again pressures of cold, of lack of trees, of a dearth of natural armaments, of the need to run after game and kill it and then, when it ran too fast, of having the wit to pick up a rock and throw it, forced one kind of mammal to step onto the thorny road leading to Homo sapiens.

The recent interesting theory that man had to return again to the sea to evolve is outside the scope of this enquiry, save that if true it merely means that those men forced off the land who developed best did so because they were pressured into it.

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Today I can pick up the telephone in my study and call Australia or America, right around the world. I can go there in a matter of hours. I can turn a switch and know what is happening there almost as it occurs. In the time it took our ancestors to plod ten miles from London I can step into my car and reach the coast.

The snags in this—the telephone delays, fogs on the airways, traffic jams—we know exist. We also know that they are merely technical matters—with a soupcon of politics—that will one day be solved. We sit back and hope that day dawns quickly ; but to help it along we look to technological means.

There are no evolutionary pressures on us to develop telepathy, telekinesis or tele what-have-you.

As for a pyrokinetic, science can set fire to distant objects quite nicely without his aid, thank you.

Evolutionary pressures today are just the same as they were ; the area in which they operate is still that of making a living, of staying alive and seeing that your children—and hence the race —survive.

To earn a living today in sufficient style to ensure a gracious life with plenty of money, leisure, ease and comfort ; to ensure good health ; to be able to live in a fog of carbon monoxide fumes ; to be able to sit and remain alert for hours on end in smoke filled rooms ; to deal with problems demanding multi-levels of thought and concentration ; to be able to cross a road safely—these are the obstacles that today face us all.

Unless, that is, we opt out of society and join the beat generation.

These are pressures on the human organism of a similar order to those pressures that forced the first fish out of the sea onto land, that forced Australopithecus to hurl his rock at fleeing game running faster than he could, that in the shivering glacial and interglacial periods forced early man to solve the riddle of fire and in doing so make himself more of a man. If you couldn't make your four lob-fin legs run fast, if you couldn't get up off your four legs onto two and use your front legs, calling them hands, to save your life—you were as dead as you are today if you can't earn a living in the modern world of cut-throat business.

These are the evolutionary pressures working on Homo sapiens. Yet—all Homo sapiens for reasons best known to the individuals will not be affected. Some men will be content to

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stay as they are. The Pools may claim them, or the grey monotony of a Company job wearing a Company badge, with the pools, the dogs, the TV for company.

And it doesn't really matter if big business is a shocking way for the human race to go. Man has changed his planet enough now for natural pressures to have receded. The pressure working on him and changing him are pressures of his own creation. It doesn't matter, because if it happens, a man will have only himself to blame.

If our theories of evolutionary pressures are correct then the more man develops scientifically the less chance there seems of his developing natural psi powers. It may be that we once possessed these strange powers in the past, but that the invention of speech and writing rendered them unnecessary. That would indicate that they must have been rudimentary anyway for speech with all its imperfections and obstructions to be better. Maybe we could have developed two ways but that the first caveman to say 'Ug !' and mean something changed us into the track we are now following.

And if that track leads us into Homo bigbusinessiensis—and they choose to call themselves Homo sapiens and us, the ones left behind, the ones evolution has passed by, Homo moronicus —who do we blame but ourselves ?

K.B.

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Dear Sir,

I first came into contact with science fiction in 1942 at the tender age of eight, this was when I found a copy of *A.S.F.* The feature novel concerned a ship on route to Earth from Venus. It had received a head-on collision with a meteor, the result being that the engines were 'up the creek.' Point of the story was 'If we could contact nearest base it makes no difference because they cannot find us. Anyway it is not possible to contact base.' Via a lot of technical gear and explanation they do, and of course in the end it all works out in their favour and they are saved.

The science in this yarn was way over my head and I did not know what a good proportion of the words meant. This, I might add, still occasionally applies. But, and this is important, the much disputed sense of wonder was there ; at least to me it was, and since then I have been an avid reader of s-f in all its forms, and through all the changes in style that it has taken. The sense of wonder still applies in a slightly diluted form, which still makes s-f my favourite literature. At the time, I was told not to read such tripe, that it was no good and that I would catch it if I didn't leave it. I am still heavily criticised for reading s-f by the majority of my friends who themselves, can't see the point of it.

Nowadays when I read an s-f magazine, I find at the end, when there is a letter department, that the same old complaints (more or less) are continuously turning up.

May I point out that no magazine, and no editor, can please all the readers all the time. They cannot even hope to please most of the readers all the time. They can only please most of the readers most of the time, if they are lucky. It is time that the readers realized this, if the majority already do so, there are some that don't. Editors have a hard enough time now without receiving a lot of silly complaints.

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Again, I would like to say, no magazine consistently prints good material. Some of them manage better than others, but all of them occasionally strike a bad patch. After all, it is in the law of averages that they should and it is something that cannot be helped. When this happens, some readers instead of being tolerant, start throwing written bricks hoping to break heads. This must irritate editors more than a little.

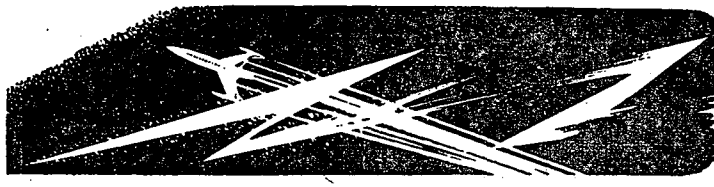
Since my first contact with s-f I have read most of the British mags, British editions of American mags, and quite a few that have not been issued in this country at all. Most of them have been quite good. Some of them were very good (these are still around) and some were poor, these last though were very few and far between.

To stop generalizing, if this is not in the waste paper basket. Your magazine and its two sisters are rated, in my books, as currently being in the top six. This with *New Worlds* being in the top three, which one of the three I will not say, but this opinion is held after reading every copy from No. 4 onwards and is my rating as based on the standard in all the issues, not on the last four or five.

My only suggestion for your magazine is that you continue to be the editor during the coming issues and that you, as editor, continue to keep the output as it is, with a little bit of everything in the s-f field, also that the contents should continue to be, as they undoubtedly are, the best that you can obtain for any particular issue.

My one congratulatory note concerns *Postmortem*. This is to the effect that you, unlike some magazines, do publish complaints as well as plaudits, also you do keep both to a minimum when there is anything else to publish in the columns.

Cpl. R. England,
R.A.F. Nr. Peterborough.



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